

CRITICAL ESSAYS 7

ON

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DRAMATIC POETRY.

BY

Monsieur de VOLTAIRE.

Arriest
R.

Et vos, O Lauri, carpam, et te, proxima Myrte,
Sic posita quoniam suaves miscetis odores.

VIRGIL

GLASGOW.

Printed for ROBERT URSE.

MDCCLXI.



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CRITICAL ESSAYS.

ESSAY on TRAGEDY.*

Addressed to Henry St. John, Lord
Viscount Bolingbroke.

THOUGH I dedicate to an Englishman a play represented at Paris, it is not, my lord, that there are wanting in France men of great merit, and excellent judges, to whom I might have paid that homage. But, you know, the tragedy of Brutus† was begun in England: you remember when I was retired to Wandsworth at my good friend, Sir Everard Falkener's, that worthy and virtuous patriot, I applied myself to write, in English prose, the first act of this play, pretty much in the same manner as it now stands in

* Prefixed to his Tragedy of Brutus.

† There is an English Brutus by an author named Lee; but it is a performance unknown, and never represented in London. Voltaire.

the French verse. I spoke to you of it sometimes, and we were both surprized that no English writer had handled this subject, which is so extremely well adapted to your theatre. You emboldened me to continue a subject so susceptible of great sentiments.

Give me leave then, my lord, to offer you Brutus, though wrote in a foreign tongue, *docte sermones utrisque linguæ*, to you who could give me instructions in the French as well as in the English; to you, who, at least, might teach me to add to my native language that energy and force which a noble liberty of thinking inspires: for the vigorous sentiments of the soul pass always to the tongue; a strength of mind always commands a strength of expression. I must own that at my return from England, where I spent a couple of years in a continual study of your language, I found myself at a loss, when I attempted to write a French tragedy. I was almost accustomed to think in English. I perceived that the French terms did not offer themselves to my imagination in the same abundance they formerly did. It was a rivulet whose source had been diverted another way: both time and pains were necessary to bring it back to its former channel. I became sensible that, to succeed in an art, we must cultivate it our whole life.

What terrified me most, was the great strictness of our poetry and the slavery of rhyme. I regretted that liberty you possess of writing your tragedies in blank verse, of lengthening,

or of shortening almost all your words at pleasure, of throwing one line into another, and of creating new terms at will, which are always adopted by the nation when their necessity is obvious, their sense easily understood, and their sound harmonious *. An English poet, I used to say, is a free man, who subjects his language to his genius; the Frenchman is a constant slave to rhyme, often obliged to write four verses to convey a thought, which in English can be expressed in one. An Englishman says what he *will* say, but a Frenchman, only what he *can*. The one runs on boldly in a vast career; the other, loaded with chains, steps on slowly in a slippery narrow path.

Notwithstanding these reflections and complaints, we shall never be able to free ourselves from the yoke of rhyme. It is essential to French poetry. Our language does not admit of transpositions, our verse does not allow of lines running into each other, our syllables are incapable of causing any sensible harmony by long or short

* It must be remarked that in France the admittance of new words finds much more difficulty than the naturalization of a foreign subject. One remarkable instance I remember, which is the word *Profateur*, prose-writer. The famous Ménage, who wrote so much and so well on the French language, and of its origin, was very fond of *Profateur*, and laboured forty years, it is said, among his brethren of the French academy to introduce this really-useful term; but without success. The writers of that nation are since grown a little less difficult, and among others, this word has gained admittance.

measures. Our hemisties * and a stated number of feet are not alone sufficient to distinguish prose from verse, and therefore the addition of rhyme is absolutely necessary in French poetry.

Besides, so many great writers, who have made use of rhyme, such as the Corneilles, Racines, and Boileaus, have so accustomed our ears to that kind of harmony, that we can endure no other; and I must repeat it, whoever attempts to get rid of a burden which was borne by the great Corneille, will be, with justice, looked upon, not as an enterprising genius, who opens out to himself a new road, but as a very weak man unable to support himself in the antient track.

It has been attempted to give us tragedies in prose; but I do not suppose that this undertaking will ever succeed. They who have *more* will not be easily satisfied with *less*. He that diminishes the public's pleasure, will be always ill received by them. If, among the pictures of Rubens or of Paul Veronese, any body placed his own designs in crayon, would he not be in the wrong to put himself in competition with these painters? We are accustomed at feasts to sing and dance; would it be enough merely to walk and speak, because it would be easier and more natural?

It is probable that *verse* will be *every where* found necessary in the tragic scene, and *rhime*

* In French verse, there is, generally, a pause about the middle of every line, which is called *Césure*, and each half-line is distinct from the other, and called *Hémistiche*.

always in *our's*. It is even to this constraint of rhyme, and to the extreme severity of our versification, that we are indebted for the excellent performances we possess in our language.

We insist that rhyme should not be at the expence of thought; it must be neither trivial nor far fetched. We require the same purity and exactness in our poetry as in our prose. We do not suffer the least license. An author must never discontinue to wear his chains, and yet he must always appear as if free from them. We acknowledge for poets, only such as have fulfilled all these conditions.

On this account it is easier to make an hundred verses in any other languages than four in French. The example of our abbe Regnier Desmarais of the French academy, and of the academy della crusca, is an evident proof of this assertion. He translated Anacreon into Italian verse, with success; and yet his French poetry, excepting a few stanzas, is extremely indifferent. Our Menage was just in the same case. How many of our ingenious countrymen have wrote excellent latin verse; whose French poetry is not even tolerable!

I know how many disputes I have had about our versification, in England, and the reproaches made me by the learned bishop of Rochester * on this puerile constraint, which, he pretends, we impose on ourselves without any colour of necessity. But be assured, my lord, that the more a foreigner is acquainted with our lan-

Amos 3. 1. A 3. Dr. Atterbury.

guage, the more he will be reconciled to the very rhyme which startles him so much in the beginning. It is not only necessary to our tragedies, but it embellishes even our comedies. A happy thought is easier remembered in verse than in prose. Descriptions of human life are always more striking when poetically expressed; and by verse, in French, we must always necessarily understand rhyme; in short, we have some comedies in prose, of the celebrated Moliere, that we have been obliged to turn into verse; and now they are never acted but in their new dress.

As I could not venture blank verse on the French stage, according to the custom of Italy and England, I would fain, at least, introduce some other beauties on our scene from yours. You must own, the English theatre is very imperfect; I have heard you say, my lord, that you had not *one* good tragedy; but for recompence, you have, in these monstrous compositions, scenes truly admirable. Almost all the tragic authors of your nation are defective in that elegance, that exactness, that decency of action and stile, and all the delicate *finesses* of the art which have established the reputation of the French theatre, since the great Corneille. But your most irregular plays have one great merit, which is that of action.

We have tragedies in France that are esteemed, which are conversations, rather than a representation of facts. An Italian author wrote to me in the following manner, in a letter on the theatres: "A critic on our Pastor-Fido" said that this work was a collection of excel-

“lent madrigals: I believe, were he now alive,
 “he would say of the French tragedies, that
 “they are a collection of fine elegies and sub-
 “lime epithalamiums.”

I am afraid this Italian is in the right: Our excessive delicacy obliges us often, to recite what should be represented. We are loth to venture a new spectacle before a people so inclined to turn every thing into ridicule that is not customary.

The place, where plays are acted, and the abuses that have crept in by degrees, are another cause of that heaviness which is found in some of our compositions. The benches on the stage, for the use of spectators, streighten the scene, and render almost every action imperfect*. This defect also hinders decorations, so much recommended by the antients, from being ever rightly adapted to the piece; and the actors cannot pass from one apartment to another before the spectators, as the Greeks and Romans used to do, in order to preserve, at the same time, unity of place and probability.

How could we dare, for example, to intro-

* The translator is informed that this great abuse was corrected in the theatre of Paris in the year 1759, through the means and at the expence of the count de Lauragais, whom it cost about a thousand pounds sterling, for the different changes and reparations that this reformation required. This young nobleman is member of the royal academy of sciences of Paris; he is remarkable for his attachment in general to every branch of science and literature, but is particularly known as a chemist and as a poet.

duce on our theatre, the ghost of Pompey, of Brutus's genius, in the midst of a parcel of young fellows, who never consider the most serious matters but as an occasion of manifesting their wit in the cracking of a joke? How could we have attempted, among such, upon the stage, the bloody corpse of Marcus before his father Cato? who says,

Welcome, my son! here lay him down, my friends,
Full in my sight, that I may view at leisure
The bloody coarse, and count those glorious wounds.
How beautiful is death, when earn'd by virtue!
Who would not be that youth? what pity is it
That we can die but once to serve our country!
Alas, my friends!
Why mourn you thus! let not a private loss
Afflict your hearts. 'Tis Rome requires our tears.
The mistress of the world, the seat of empire,
The nurse of heroes, the delight of gods,
That humbled the proud tyrants of the earth,
And set the nations free, Rome is no more.
O liberty! O virtue! O my country!

This is what the late Mr. Addison did not dread to represent to the English stage, and what has been translated into Italian, and acted in several towns of Italy. And yet if *we* should venture such a spectacle at Paris, do not you think the pit would be shocked, and the ladies shudder?

You cannot imagine how far they push this sort of delicacy. The author of our tragedy of Manlius took his subject from Mr. Otway's *Ve-*

nice Preserved; and each, from the history of the conspiracy of the marquiss de Bedmar, wrote by the abbe de St. Real; and give me leave to add, that this piece of history, equal perhaps to Sallust, is much superior either to your Otway or to our Manlius.

In the first place, you will take notice of the prejudice which obliged our French poet to disguise under Roman names a known fact, which the English author naturally relates under the real ones. It was not thought ridiculous on the theatre of London, that a Spanish ambassador should be called Bedmar, and that conspirators should be named Jaffier, Pierre, and Eliot. That alone in France would have been sufficient to damn the play. But Otway goes still further; he is not afraid of assembling the conspirators. Renaud receives their oaths and promises, assigns to each his particular post, fixes the hour of massacre, and, every now and then, casts unquiet and suspicious looks on Jaffier, whom he mistrusts. He makes them this pathetic speech, translated word for word from the abbe de St. Real;

Never did so profound repose fore-run
Calamity so great; nay, our good fortune
Has blinded the most piercing of mankind,
Strengthen'd the fearfulest, charm'd the most respect-
Confounded the most subtle: for we live, [ful,
We live, my friends, and quickly shall our life
Prove fatal to these tyrants;

What has the French writer done in this case? he dares not introduce such a number of personages on the scene, and is therefore obliged to make Renaud, under the name of Rutilus, repeat a small part of this speech which, he says, he had before made to the conspirators. You conceive from this very account, how much superior the English drama must be to the French, though Otway's play should be, in other respects, monstrous.

With how much pleasure I saw in London your tragedy of Julius Caesar, which has been the delight of your nation for a century and a half past! I do not indeed pretend to approve the barbarous irregularities with which it abounds. It is only surprizing that there are not still greater defects in a work, wrote in an age of ignorance, by a man who did not even understand Latin, and whose only master was his genius*.

* This notion hath been abundantly refuted. The present bishop of Gloucester has strongly contended for Shakespear's learning, and has produced many imitations and parallel passages with antient authors.

I am inclined, says Mr. Pope, to think this opinion proceeded originally from the zeal of the partizans of our author and Ben Johnson; as they endeavoured to exalt the one at the expence of the other. It is ever the nature of parties to be in extremes; and nothing is so probable, as that because Ben Johnson had much the most learning, it was said on the one hand, that Shakespear had none at all; and because Shakespear had much the most wit and fancy, it was retorted on the other, that Johnson wanted both.

Pref. to Mr. Pope's Edit. of Shakespear.

But amidst so many gross faults, with what ecstacy did I see Brutus still holding the poynard stained with the blood of Caesar! and having assembled the Roman people, addressing himself to them in the following manner:

“Romans, countrymen, and friends! hear for my cause; and be silent, that you may hear. Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses that you may the better judge. If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar’s, to him I say, that Brutus’s love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand, why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves; than that Caesar were dead, to live all freemen? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but as he was ambitious, I slew him. There are tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honour for his valour, and death for his ambition. Who is here so base, that would be a boundman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so rude, that would not be a Roman? If any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so vile, that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. ——— I pause for a reply. ———

Romans.

None, Brutus, none.

Brutus.
 Then none have I offended. — I have done no more to Caesar than you shall do to Brutus. The question of his death is enrolled in the capitol; his glory not extenuated, wherein he was worthy; nor his offences enforced, for which he suffered death. — Here comes his body, mourned by Mark Antony: who, though he had no hand in his death, shall receive the benefit of his dying, a place in the common-wealth; as which of you shall not? with this I depart, that as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death.

Romans.

Live, Brutus, live!"

After this scene, Mark Antony comes to raise the compassion of the very Romans, in whom Brutus had just inspired all his sternness and inhumanity. Antony, by an artful oration, brings back insensibly these proud minds; and when they are softened into pity, then he discovers to them the corps of Caesar; and by a display of the most pathetic expressions, and most moving complaints, he stirs them up to mutiny and revenge.

Perhaps the French would not suffer upon the stage a chorus composed of Roman plebeians and artizans; or the bloody corps of Caesar exposed to the eyes of the multitude; and, that multitude provoked to revenge from the rostrum. It is custom alone, the governor of the world, that can change the taste of nations, and turn

into entertainment what was before the object of their antipathy.

The Greeks have hazarded spectacles which would not be less disagreeable to us. Hypolitus, shattered by his fall, comes on the stage to count his wounds, and to utter doleful cries. Philoctetes falls into his melancholy fits, and blackish blood gushes from his sores. Oedipus, after pulling out his eyes, enters, yet bloody, on the stage, inveighing against gods and men. The moans of Clitemnestra are heard by the spectators whilst her own son is murdering her, and her daughter Electra encouraging him from the stage, and saying, "strike, do not spare her; she did not spare our father." Prometheus is bound to the rocks with nails which are drove into his body and limbs. The furies answer the bloody ghost of Clitemnestra with howling and confused noise. Several Greek tragedies, in a word, are full of this kind of terror pushed to the greatest excess.

I am convinced, the tragic writers of Greece, in other respects, superior to the English, have mistook horror for terror, and what is really loathsome and incredible, for the tragical and marvellous. The art was in its infancy at Athens in the time of Æschylus, as it was in London in Shakespear's time; but among the glaring faults of the Grecian poets, and, even of yours, we find a true pathos, and many extraordinary beauties; and if some Frenchmen, who are acquainted with foreign manners, only by translators or by hear-say, condemn them with-

out restriction; they may be compared, methinks, to those blind men who insist, that the rose cannot have lively colours, because they feel the thorns, as they grope along.

But as the Greeks, and especially the English, have passed the bounds of decency, and given spectacles which are really horrible, when they only meant them to be terrible; we Frenchmen on the other hand, as backward as you have been bold, stopt too soon for fear of going too far, and some times do not arrive at the tragic point, lest we should pass its limits.

I am far from proposing that the stage should become a scene of slaughter and destruction, as it is in Shakespear and in his successors; who, not being possessed of his genius, have only imitated his faults; but I dare assert, that there are situations which now appear disagreeable and horrible to the French, which, if they were well conducted, and artfully represented, and, especially, if softened by the charms of fine poetry, would create a kind of pleasure, of which, we have not, at present, the least conception.

* Il n'est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux.
Qui par l'art imité ne puisse plaire aux yeux.

Boileau.

* The most hideous monsters, when nicely imitated by art, may be made pleasing to the eye.

Monsieur de Voltaire, in most of the passages which he quotes from English poets, translates them into prose. If such a poetic genius did not think fit to translate into verse what was in verse in the original; how much more justifiable and proper must

It should be glad to know, at least, why it is allowed to theatrical heroes and heroines to kill themselves, and, at the same time, that it is prohibited, they should kill others? Is the scene less imbrued with blood when Athalia, stabs herself for her lover, than it would be by Caesar's murder? and if the appearance of the slain son of Cato on the stage before his father's eyes, be the occasion of an admirable speech from this old Roman; if it has been applauded in England and in Italy by people who are the greatest partizans to French decency; if the most delicate of the fair sex have not been offended at it, why should not Frenchmen accustom themselves to it? Is not nature the same through all mankind?

All these rules, not to imbrue the stage with blood, not to introduce upon it above three persons discoursing at a time, might meet with some exceptions among us, as they did among the Greeks; laws of decency, for the most part somewhat arbitrary, are not like the fundamental laws of the theatre, which are the three unities. It would shew a want of talents and fertility to extend an action beyond the limited time and place. Ask a man, who has hurried together too many events in the same play, the reason of this conduct? If he is sincere, he will tell you, he wanted genius to fill his piece with a single fact, and if he employs two days and takes in two towns for the scene

B 2

it be in the present *prosaic* translation, to do the same!

of action, be assured, it is because he had not the address to confine it to the space of three hours, and within the limits of a palace, as probability required it.

It is quite different with him who hazards a dreadful spectacle on the stage; he does not mean to go beyond the probable; and this boldness, far from supposing a want of parts in the author, requires, on the contrary, a great genius to render, by his poetry, that action truly great, which without sublimity of expression, would appear heinous and loathsome.

This is what our great Corneille once dared attempt in his *Rodogune*. He introduces a mother, who, in presence of her courtiers, and an ambassador, wants to poison her son and her daughter-in-law, after having killed another son with her own hands; she offers them the empoisoned draught; and, on their refusal and suspicion, she takes it herself, and dies of the poison she had destined for others.

Such terrible strokes must be practised with caution; and it does not become every body to make use of them. These innovations require great circumspection and a masterly execution. The English themselves allow, for example, that Shakespear is the only poet among them, who has been able to make ghosts appear, and speak with any success.

Within that circle none durst move but he.

Dryden.

The more majestic or awful a theatrical acti-

on, the more insipid a frequent repetition; as the account of battles, than which, nothing can be more terrible, becomes at last cold and tiresome, through a constant repetition of them in history.

The only play in which Racine has introduced any spectacle is in *Athalie*, his master-piece. An infant appears on the throne, his nurse stands by him, and he is surrounded by priests; a queen gives orders to her soldiers to put this child to death, and armed Levites run to his defence. All this action is pathetic, but without the sublimity of stile and expression, it would have been puerile and silly.

The more we aim at striking the eye with pomp and state, the greater necessity we are under of supporting it with elevated thoughts and sentiments. Otherwise the author is a decorator, not a tragic poet. About thirty years ago a tragedy called *Montezuma* was acted in Paris: the scene opened by a new spectacle: a palace was represented of a magnificent but barbarous structure; Montezuma appeared in a very singular dress; arrow-armed slaves were placed at the bottom of the stage; eight grandees of the court were, near his majesty, prostrate on the ground; Montezuma begins the play by saying to his courtiers:

Arise, your emperor gives you leave to-day,
To see and speak to him.

This spectacle was pleasing; but it was the

only good thing in the whole play. For my part, I must confess it was not without some dread that I introduced on the French theatre the senators of Rome in red robes, and giving their opinions. I remembered that when I had formerly introduced in Oedipus, a chorus of Thebans saying,

O Death! we all implore thy dreadful aid;
Grant our desires, and terminate our days!

The pit, instead of being seriously affected, was only struck with the pretended ridicule of giving these lines to be repeated by actors who were unaccustomed to such solemn dirges; and, instead of applauding the intent, the execution was laughed at. This is what hindered me from making the senators speak in Brutus, when Titus is accused before them; and from encreasing the terror of the situation by the surprise and grief of these fathers of Rome, who must have marked their astonishment, otherwise than by dumb shew; but which was not put in execution.

However, my lord, if there are any tolerable passages in this work, I am obliged for it to my friends who think like you. They encouraged me to moderate the severity of Brutus's temper by paternal love, that the effort he makes in condemning his son might be the more pitied and admired. They advised me to give Tullia a character of tenderness and innocence; because, if I had made her a haughty heroine capable of speaking to Titus, as to a subject who should

obey his sovereign, Titus would have been debased, and the ambassador would have been useless. They desired, that Titus should be drawn a young man violent in his passions, loving Rome and his father, adoring Tullia, thinking it his duty to be faithful to the very senate by which he thought himself injured, and hurried away from his duty by a passion which he imagined he was master of.

And in fact, if Titus had been of the opinion of his mistress, and had given sufficient reasons in favour of kingly authority, Brutus then would be looked upon as a leader of rebels: Titus would feel no more remorse; Brutus would not have excited his passion.

They desired me also to take care that Brutus's sons should not both appear upon the stage, because the interest is lost when divided; "but above all, said they, let your piece be simple; imitate that excellency of the Greeks; be assured that a multiplicity of events, and a complication of interests is only the resource of barren minds, who are capable of drawing from one passion the matter of five acts; strive to finish every scene as if it were the only one you had to write. Beautiful details are what supports a work in verse, and makes it descend to posterity. It is often the peculiar manner of expressing common thoughts, it is that art of embellishing by diction what every man feels equally well, that makes the great poet. There are neither far-fetched sentiments nor romantic adventures in the fourth book of Virgil; all is extremely natural, and yet it is the greatest effort of the hu-

man mind. Racine is so very much superior to those who said the same things he did; only because he said them better. Corneille is never truly great, but when his expressions are equal to his thoughts. Remember this precept of Mr. Boileau:

Et qui tout ce qu'il dit facile à retenir,
De son ouvrage en vous laisse un long souvenir.*

This is what is wanting in a great many dramatic works, which by the art of an actor and the voice and figure of an actress, have met with success on our theatres. How many ill wrote plays have had more representations than Cinna † or Britannicus †? but who has ever got by heart a line of any of these flimsy performances, while every body remembers Cinna and Britannicus? It was in vain that the Regulus of Pardon drew tears from us by some affecting situations; the piece, and all such pieces, are utterly despised, though the authors should trumpet their own praise in their prefaces."

I believe, my lord, you are going to ask how it came about that such judicious critics should give me leave to mention love in a tragedy which bears the title of Junius Brutus, and to mix this passion with the austere virtue of a Roman senate, and the politics of an ambassador?

* Let every thing you write be so natural that it will be easily imprinted on the mind.

† One of Corneille's finest tragedies, by many looked upon as his master-piece.

‡ A tragedy of Racine's.

Our nation is upbraided with having enervated the theatre by too much love; and the English deserve the same reproach for very near a century past; for you have always borrowed part of our vices and our fashions. But will you give me leave to mention my opinion on this subject?

To insist on having love in every tragedy seems to me to be an effeminate taste: To banish it from all, would be, I think, a very unreasonable piece of ill-humour.

The theatre, either tragic or comic, is the living picture of the passions of mankind. The ambition of a prince is represented in a tragedy; and in a comedy private vanity is rendered ridiculous. In one, you laugh at the coquetry and intrigues of a citizen's wife, and in the other you lament the unhappy passion of a Phædra. In the same manner, love diverts you in a romance, and transports you in Virgil's Dido.

Love is not a more essential fault in a tragedy, than it is in the *Æneid*. It can be only censured when improperly introduced, or handled without art.

The Greeks seldom ventured this passion on the theatre of Athens; because, in the first place, their tragedies having been originally founded on dreadful subjects, the minds of the spectators were accustomed to this kind of spectacles. In the second place, the women lived a much more retired life than ours do, so that the language of love was not then, as it is now, the subject of every conversation; and the poets therefore were less inclined to introduce a passi-

on which is the most difficult of all to be accurately described, and nicely handled; as it requires the greatest caution, and is susceptible of the greatest delicacies.

A third reason which seems to me to be of some weight, is, that there were then no actresses; the women's parts were performed by men, whose faces were covered with masks. Love must have necessarily appeared ridiculous in their mouths.

It is quite the contrary in London and Paris. I must own, that authors would have little understood their interest, or little known their audience's inclinations, if they had never made an Oldfield, a Duclos *, or a le Couvreur † speak but of ambition or politics.

The misfortune is, that love in our theatrical heroes is often nothing more than gallantry; and in yours, it sometimes runs into mere debauchery.

In our Alcibiades, a play very well conducted, but poorly wrote, and therefore little esteemed, these bad verses spoke in an enchanting tone by the Æsop ‡ of the last age were long admired:

Ah ! lorsque pénétré d'un amour véritable,
En gemissant aux peids d'un objet adorable,

* † The two most famous actresses that Fance has possessed, before the Dumesnil and Clairon of the present times, who are equal, if not superior, to those of any age or nation.

‡ Supposed to be Baron, who is talked of in France, as probably posterity will in England talk of Mr. Garrick.

J'ai connu, dans ses yeux timides ou distraits,
 Que mes soins de son cœur ont pu troubler la paix,
 Que par l'aveu secret d'une ardeur mutuelle;
 La miennne a pris encore une force nouvelle;
 Dans ces momens si doux, j'ai cent fois éprouvé,
 Qu'un mortel peut goûter un bonheur achevé.

In your Venice preserved, old Renaud wants
 to ravish the wife of Jaffier, and she complains
 of it in terms not very decent, saying, that he
 came to her unbuttoned, &c.

That love might be worthy of the tragic
 scene, it should become the necessary knot of the
 play, and not be brought in to fill up the va-
 cancies of your tragedies and ours, which are,
 both, too long; it must be a passion truly tra-
 gic, considered as a weakness, and resisted by
 remorse. Either love must be the cause of
 crimes and misfortunes, in order to shew the
 danger of such a passion, or virtue must get the
 better of it, to prove that it is not irresistible.
 Otherwise it will be more properly adapted to
 eclogues and to comedy

It is you, my lord, who are to determine

* With tender passion, when my breast was warm'd,
 And softly sighing at the fair one's feet,
 By the dear language of her eyes I found
 My love had raised new conflicts in her breast;
 When, by the with'd confession of her flame,
 The ardor I expressed received new strength;
 In these sweet moments, loving and beloved,
 I often felt that man is sometimes blest'd
 With happiness complete.

whether I have fulfilled any of these conditions; but above all things, I beg your friends will not judge of the taste of genius of our nation by this essay, and the tragedy that I send you. I am perhaps one of those who apply to literature in France with the least success; and if the opinions, which I here submit to your judgment, be disapproved of, I alone am to bear the blame.

In your Venice preserved, old Richard, to ravish the wife of Jachin, and the complaints of it in terms not very decent, saying that he came to her bedchamber, &c.

That love might be worthy of the tragic scene, it should become the necessary knot of the play, and not be brought in to fill up the vacancies of your tragedies and ours, which are both too long; it must be a passion truly tragic, considered as a weakness, and related to romance. Either love must be the cause of crimes and misfortune, in order to show the danger of such a passion, or virtue must be the object of it, to prove that it is not irreconcilable. Otherwise it will be more properly adapted to comedies and to comedy.

It is you, my lord, who are to determine

* With tender passion, when my breast was warm'd,
And softly sighing at the far one's door,
By the dear language of her eyes I found
My love had such new conflicts in her breast;
When, by the smile of confusion of her face,
The ardor I expected received new strength;
In such sweet moments, loving and beloved,
I knew that love was in domestic bliss,
With happiness complete.

Of Love-Intrigues in Tragedy.

In a letter to father Porée.*

I send you, my reverend father, the edition that has been lately published of the tragedy of Oedipus †. I have endeavoured to throw out, as much as possible, the silly expressions of a mis-placed intrigue, which I had been obliged to introduce, among the bold and manly strokes that the subject required. You must know, in my justification, that young as I was, when I wrote Oedipus, I composed it pretty much in the same manner, in which it will now appear to you. My head was full of the antients, and of your instructions; I knew but little of the theatre of Paris, but was better acquainted with that of Athens. I consulted Mr. Dacier ‡, who

* Prefixed to the tragedy of Oedipus.

† The author wrote this play when he was but nineteen. It was acted in the year 1718, and ran forty-five nights successively.

‡ A famous French critic, particularly fond of, and well acquainted with, the Grecian language and writings. He translated Hippocrates and other books from the Greek into the French.

advised me to introduce a chorus in every scene after the manner of the Greeks, which was advising me to walk in the streets of Paris in Plato's robes. It was with difficulty that I could prevail upon the actors of Paris to admit a chorus three or four times only, during the whole play. It was still more difficult to make them accept a tragedy almost entirely void of amorous intrigue. The actresses laughed at me when they perceived there was no mistress's part. The scene of the double discovery between Oedipus and Jocasta, partly taken from Sophocles, appeared to them quite insipid. In short, the actors who were great men at that time, and great coxcombs, absolutely refused to bring on the play. I was then extremely young; I supposed, they must be in the right. In compliance to them, I spoiled the whole tragedy, by introducing tender sentiments in a subject so little susceptible of them. When there was a love-intrigue, the players began to be satisfied; but were still entirely against the important scene between Oedipus and Jocasta. Sophocles and his imitator were both laughed at. I argued the case; and employed some friends, by whose interest Oedipus was at last represented. One of the players, whose name was Quinault, said, that to punish me for my obstinacy, they ought to act it with it's bad fourth act taken from the Greek. Besides, it was looked upon as the greatest mark of rashness in me, to dare to undertake a subject which Peter Corneille had already handled so successfully. Corneille's Oedipus at that time was thought excellent; but, for my part, I

found it a very bad performance: twelve years ago I dared not say so; but now every body is of my opinion. It is sometimes a great while before justice is exactly administered. The two Oedipus of Mr de la Motte * had their proper value set, in a shorter time. The reverend father de Tournemine has probably shewn you the preface, in which I declare war to that author. Mr. de la Motte is a very ingenious man; he somewhat resembles the Grecian wrestler, who, when he was actually down, proved by force of argument, that he was the conqueror.

I entirely differ in my opinions from Mr. de la Motte; but you have taught me to dispute like a gentleman. I write against him in so civil a manner, that I desired he should be the examiner of this very preface, in which I endeavour in every line, to point out his mistakes; and he has himself approved my little polemical dissertation. It is thus men of letters should dispute; and thus they would attack each other had they been bred under your care; but in general, they are as satirical as lawyers, and as choleric as jansenists †. The human letters are become extremely inhumane. Men of literature injure, cabal,

* A very ingenious French writer; the most remarkable of his works is a volume of fables in verse, on a different plan from Æsop's; instead of beasts, he introduces and personifies, in a very delicate and moral manner, the different qualities of the mind, as well as the several virtues we are capable of, and the vices we are prone to.

† A religious sect in France, which, like all other new sects that are persecuted, is remarkably rigid, zealous, and passionate.

calumniate and lampoon each other. It is surprizing that people will take the liberty to write things they dare not speak. For my part, I have learned from you, reverend father, to avoid such meannesses; you have taught me how to live, as well as how to write.

The Muses sweet, heavenly train,
Are not an envious sist'hood:
Ambrosia is their constant food,
Wormwood and bitters they disdain:
And when from Jupiter a call
Brings them to th' immortal hall,
Where gods assemble and rejoice;
There, spiteful Satyr's harsher sound,
[So Jove decreed,] was never found
To mingle with the muses voice †.

Adieu, my dear reverend father; I shall be ever devoted to you and yours with that tender acknowledgement which is due to you, and which your pupils do not always preserve.

† The translator, who has no sort of pretence to poetry, has attempted the above lines, merely to shew that the original was in verse. The number of verses, length of lines, and return of rhyme, are the same as in the French.

A DEFENCE of the laws of the **DRAMA**,
concerning the unities of Action, Place
and Time; against the opinion of Mon-
sieur de la MOTTE. In the Preface to
OEDIPUS.

OEDIPUS, of which a new edition is now
published, was represented, for the first
time, in the beginning of the year 1718. The
public received it with great indulgence, and has
often seen it since, with pleasure: which I attri-
bute, partly, to the advantage this tragedy has
always met with, of being extremely well acted,
and partly, to the solemnity and pathos of the
subject. Father Folard a jesuit, and Mr. de la
Motte of the French academy, have since hand-
led the same subject, and both have avoided the
faults which I have been guilty of. It would
not become me to give an account of their per-
formances. My criticisms, and, even my prais-
es, would appear equally suspicious*.

* Mr. de la Motte published two Oedipuses in
1726, one in rhyme, the other in prose. The Oedi-
pus in rhyme appeared on the stage four nights; the
other was never acted. Voltaire.

I am still less inclined to attempt, upon this occasion, laying down rules for the conduct of a dramatic poem. I am persuaded that all the subtle reasoning on this subject, which has been so much repeated for some years past, is not worth one masterly scene, and that there is more to be learned in Polyæstes * and Cinna †, than in all the precepts of the abbe d' Aubignac ‡. Severus § and Paulina § are the true masters of the art. So, many books wrote on painting by men of taste, do not instruct a disciple so much as seeing a single head by Raphael.

The principles of the arts, which depend on the imagination, are all easy and simple, all drawn from nature and from reason. Pardon † and Boyer † knew them as perfectly as Corneille or Racine. The difference always has lain, and ever will lie, in the application of them. The

* † Two admired tragedies wrote by the elder Corneille.

‡ A great theatrical critic, but much in the same situation with our Rymer, who, notwithstanding all his rules, was unable to write a tolerable play himself.

§ § Characters in Corneille's Polyæstes.

† † Two French dramatic authors of the last age; Pardon was a very correct, but weak, writer; he was particularly the rival of Mr. Racine, and not without some shew of success; but Racine has stood the test, while Pardon is entirely forgot. Boyer's plays are still less known than those of Pardon.

authors of *Armida* * and *Issé* †, and the very worst composers, followed the same rules of music. Le Pouffin worked from the same principles with Vignon. It seems therefore to as little purpose to talk about rules at the head of a play, as it would be, for a painter to begin by a dissertation on his pictures, or for a musician to attempt proving that his composition ought to please.

But as Mr. de la Motte wants to establish rules directly contrary to those which have been followed by our great masters; it is proper to assert the cause of these antient laws, not because they are antient, but because they are just and necessary, and might meet in a man of his merit, a formidable antagonist.

Mr. de la Motte would fain banish the unities of action, place, and time.

The French were the first among the mo-

* Signior Baptista Lulli, of whom the Spectator thus speaks: "He found the French music extremely defective, and very often barbarous: However, knowing the genius of the people, the humour of their language, and the prejudiced ears he had to deal with, he did not pretend to extirpate the French music, and plant the Italian in its stead: but only to cultivate and civilize it with innumerable graces and modulations, which he borrowed from the Italian. By this means the French music is now perfect in its kind; and when you say it is not so good as the Italian, you only mean that it does not please you so well; for there is scarce a Frenchman who would not wonder to hear you give the Italian such a preference."

† Monsieur Rameau, the present Handel of the French, who now no longer relish the music of Baptista Lulli.

derns who revived these wise dramatic laws. The other nations continued a great while without receiving a yoke that seemed so strict; but as it was a reasonable one, and that reason gets the better of every thing at last, they have all now bent to it. The English writers at present affect to declare before their plays, that the continuance of the action is the same with that of the representation; they go farther than us, who have been in this point their masters.

The learned of every country begin to look upon those ages as barbarous, in which, these laws were unknown to the greatest geniuses, such as Lopez de Vega * and Shakespear. They confess the obligation they have to us, for recovering them from that barbarism. Is it possible that a Frenchman can now employ all his parts and talents in order to bring us back to it again? Though I had had nothing else to say against Mr. de la Motte's opinion, but that Corneille, Racine, Moliere, Addison, Congreve, Maffei, have all submitted to the dramatic laws which he endeavours to subvert, it should be sufficient to deter any body that was tempted to break through them; but Mr. de la Motte deserves to be answered with arguments, rather than with authorities.

What is a dramatic performance? the representation of an action. Why not of two or three actions? because the mind is incapable of comprehending several objects at the same time;

* The greatest dramatic poet of the Spaniards, and almost the only one, whose works are known abroad.

because the interest, which is divided, is soon destroyed; because we are even shocked at seeing two different pieces of history in the same picture; and because nature alone points out to us this precept, which ought to be as invariable as nature's self.

For the same reasons, the unity of place is also essential; for one action is necessarily confined to one place. If the persons represented are at Athens in the first act, how can they get to Persia by the second? Has Le Brun ever drawn Alexander at Arbella and in the Indies on the same canvas? "I should not be surprized, says Mr. de la Motte, artfully, that a people of sense, but less fond of rules, should be satisfied to see Coriolanus represented, as condemned at Rome in the first act; received by the Volscii in the third; and besieging Rome in the fourth, etc."

In the first place, I cannot conceive how a rational and learned people should not be fond of rules which are the result of good sense, and calculated to heighten their entertainment. In the second place, every body must perceive that what Mr. de la Motte mentions as the proper subject for one tragedy, in fact, contains subjects for three; and that this project, though it be well executed, would be nothing more than a plot of Jodelle's* or Hardy's†, finely versified by a good modern poet.

The unity of time is naturally joined to the

* † Two French poets; cotemporary with our Shakespear, guilty of his faults, but not possessed of his genius

other unities. When I am present at a play, that is, at the representation of an action, I mean to see the accomplishment of that one action. Suppose, for instance, a conspiracy at Rome against Augustus: I want to know what will become of Augustus and of the conspirators. If the poet lengthens out the action to a fortnight, he must give me an account of what passes during that time, for my business there is to be informed of every thing that happens, and nothing useless should happen. If he relates what passes every day, there are then fifteen different actions of more or less consequence. It is no longer accomplishing the conspiracy, which he should come to at once, but giving a long history which cannot be interesting, as it only serves to keep back the decision of the event which I am impatient to be acquainted with. I did not come to the play for the history of a hero, but to see one action of his life.

Besides, the spectator is but three hours at the play, and therefore the action should only last three hours. Cinna, Andromache *, Bajazet †, Oedipus either Corneille's or Mr. de la Motte's, or mine (if I may mention it here), are not of a longer duration. If other plots require a greater length of time for their execution, it is a license only pardonable in favour of very great beauties, and the farther this license is extended, the greater the fault must be.

* † Two of Racine's tragedies; the first has been translated, or rather imitated in a very masterly manner by Mr. Phillips, under the title of the Distressed Mother.

We often lengthen the unity of time to twenty-four hours, and that of place to a large palace. More strictness would exclude many fine subjects, and more indulgences would give room to much abuse. For, if it were once allowed that the plot of a play might take in two days, it would be soon extended to six months by the first author whose plan would so require it; and another would take up two years; and, if the scene of action was not limited to some one spot, we should have plays in the manner of Shakespear's *Julius Caesar*, in which Brutus and Cassius are at Rome in the first act, and in Thessaly in the last. The observation of these laws not only contributes to the avoiding of many faults, but also gives rise to several beauties; in the same manner as the rules of architecture, when exactly followed, necessarily compose a pleasing structure. When the unities of action, place and time are preserved, the play must of consequence be simple; and this simplicity is the great merit of all Racine's works, and the merit which Aristotle required. Mr. de la Motte, in defending a tragedy of his own writing, prefers a multitude of events to this noble simplicity. He thinks his arguments confirmed by the example of *Berenice* * which is not liked, and the great esteem in which the *Cid* † is held to this day.

* A tragedy of Racine's, entirely founded on this one passage in Livy, *Titus Reginam Berenicen, qui etiam nuptias pollicitus fenebatur, statim ab urbe dimisit invitam*. The want of incidents hindered this play from proceeding on the stage, though it is a master-piece of art, delicacy, and sentiment.

† A play wrote by Corneille, and taken from the

It is certain the *Cid* is more affecting than *Berenice*, which last, is rather an elegy than a simple tragedy; the *Cid*, the plot of which is truly tragic, does not owe its success to the multiplicity of events, but it pleases notwithstanding that multiplicity: it affects notwithstanding the infants; not on account of the infants.

Mr. de la Motte is of opinion, that a writer may entirely despise these laws, and content himself with the unity of interest, which he says he has found out, and calls a paradox: but this unity seems to me to be nothing more than the unity of action. "If several personages, says Mr. de la Motte, are differently interested in the same event, and are all worthy of my entering into their passions, there is, then, an unity of action, though not an unity of interest".

Since I have taken the liberty to dispute upon this point, with Mr. de la Motte, I have read over the discourse of the great Corneille on the three unities; who is worthier of being consulted than I am. He expresses himself in this manner: "My opinion then is, and I have already mentioned it, that the unity of action consists in the unity of intrigue and in the unity of danger." Let the reader peruse this part of Corneille's works, and he will soon determine between Mr. de la Motte and me; and though I were not strength-

Spanish; it was so much liked by Cardinal Richelieu, who, besides, was fond of poetic fame, that he offered a sum equalling five thousand pounds sterling to let him pass for the author of it; but Corneille had too much spirit, and too great a love for laurel glory to consent to such a bargain.

ened by the authority of this great man, I have an argument of still greater force, which is experience. In our best tragedies, the chief personages are all differently interested; but these different interests are subservient to that of the principal personage, and, then, there is unity of action.

If on the other hand, all these different interests are not subservient to the principal actor, if they are not so many lines which tend to one center, the interest is double; and what is called action upon the stage, is also double. Let us therefore keep up as Corneille did, to the three unities, in which, all other rules, that is, all other beauties, are included. Yet Mr. de la Motte calls them principles of fancy, and pretends we may do without them in our tragedies, as well as neglect them in our operas; which, in my opinion, is endeavouring to reform a regular government upon the example of an anarchy.

The opera is an entertainment singular and odd, as it is magnificent and striking; where the ears and eyes are better satisfied than the mind; where, through a constant subserviency to music, the most ridiculous faults are become necessary*; where the actors dance around a tomb,

* Mr. Addison, who in general was averse to operas, so far agrees with monsieur de Voltaire in this particular, as to say, "An opera may be allowed to be extravagantly lavish in its decorations, as its only design is to gratify the senses, and keep up an indolent attention in the audience."

and sing at the destruction of a town; where you may see now Pluto's palace, now the palace of the sun; where gods and demons, magicians, monsters and miracles are formed and destroyed in the twinkling of an eye. We tolerate these extravagancies; we are even fond of them, because we suppose ourselves on enchanted ground; and provided there be some show, fine dancing, delightful music, and a few interesting scenes, we are satisfied. It would be as ridiculous to expect the unities of action, place and time, preserved in *Alceste**, as it would be to attempt introducing dances and devils, in *Cinna* or in *Rodogune*.

And though we dispense with rules in our operas, yet these dramatic laws are so natural and necessary, and contribute so much to entertain the spectator, that the best operas are those, in which, they are least broke through; and there are some even, in which they are strictly observed. How then can Mr. de la Motte reproach his country-men with levity in condemning in one spectacle, what they approve in another?

There is no one but could make the following

* One of the first and finest of the French operas; the music was composed by Baptista Lulli, and the words by Quinaut, who was a man of real poetic genius and taste, as it is now generally allowed in France, notwithstanding Boileau's criticism and contempt of this writer, which he shewed in the following lines:

Si je pense exprimer un auteur sans défaut.
La raison, dit Virgile, et la Rime Quinaut.

answer to Mr. de la Motte: "I have a right to expect much greater perfection in a tragedy than in an opera, because in a tragedy my attention is not divided; it is not from a well tuned note, nor from a finely-executed step, that my pleasure is to arise; my mind alone is to be satisfied."

I admire a man who can conduct and bring about in one place, and in the same day, a single event, which I conceive without fatigue, and which affects me by degrees. The more I see that this simplicity is difficult, the more I am pleased with it; and if afterwards I would fain account for this satisfaction, I find myself of Boileau's opinion, who says,

Qu'en un lieu, qu'en un jour, un seul fait accompli
Tienne jusqu'à la fin le théâtre rempli.*

I have, besides, in my favour, the authority of the great Corneille; I have also his example, and the pleasure which his plays afford me in proportion as he has, more or less, strictly obeyed this rule.

Mr. de la Motte, not content to banish from the stage these fundamental laws, would fain also exclude poetry from it, and introduce tragedies in prose.

This ingenious and fertile author, who has been all his life writing poetry, or something in prose relative to his poetry, now rails at his

* The theatre should be taken up from the first to the last act with a single event; past in one day and in one place.

own art, and treats it with the same contempt that he treated Homer, whom, however, he has deigned to translate. Neither Virgil, Tasso, Boileau, Racine, or Mr. Pope, ever took it into their heads to write against the harmony of verse, nor Lulli against music, nor Sir Isaac Newton against the mathematics. Some men have been weak enough to think themselves above their profession; but none strove to make their profession contemptible. There are too many people who despise poetry, because they are not acquainted with it. Paris is full of men of understanding, born with organs sensible of all harmony, to whom music is but noise, and poetry but ingenious fancies. If these persons find out that a man of parts who has published five or six volumes of poems, is of their opinion, will not they think that they have a right to look upon all other poets as madmen; and Mr. de la Motte as the only one, who has recovered his understanding? it is therefore necessary to answer his objections for the honour of the art, and I may say, for the honour of a country, who owes part of its glory, among foreigners, to the perfection of this very art.

Mr. de la Motte asserts that rhyme is a barbarous custom lately introduced. And yet all the people of the earth, except the ancient Greeks and Romans, have always rhymed and continue to do so to this day. The return of the same sounds is so natural to man, that it is as common among the savages, as it is at Rome, at Paris, at London, or at Madrid. Montaigne has a song in American rhymes translated into

French, and in one of Mr. Addison's Spectators there is a translation of a Lapland ode in rhyme; which is full of sentiment and expression. The Greeks, *quibus dedit ore rotunda musa loqui*, born under a happier climate, and favoured by nature with organs more delicate than other nations, formed a language, whose syllables, by their different length and shortness, were capable of expressing the slow or rapid motions of the soul. From this variety of sounds there resulted, in their poetry and even in their prose, a harmony which the antient Italians felt and imitated; but which, no other nation has been since able to attain. But poetry, which is what Mr. de la Motte argues against, whether it be rhyme, or cadenced syllables, has ever been, and will be ever, cultivated by all nations.

Before Herodotus, even history was wrote in verse by the Grecians, who took that custom from the antient Egyptians, the wisest, most learned, and best governed people of the earth. This custom was a very rational one; for the design of history was to preserve, to future ages, the memory of the few men whose example deserved imitation. People then did not take it into their heads to publish the history of a convent or a village in several volumes in folio.

* Voluminous histories of unimportant places and things are much more frequent among the French than with us. As they are, in great measure, debarred from the two most interesting subjects, religion and government, and as they have among them numberless bookish Priars who can thus employ their time and satisfy their vanity,

Nothing was wrote but what was worthy of being read, and of being retained. And on this account the harmony of verse was made use of to help the memory; and therefore the first philosophers, legislators, founders of religions and historians were all poets.

One would suspect that poetry should be defective, on such subjects, either in precision or in harmony: but since Virgil has united these two great qualities which seem incompatible; since Boileau and Racine have equalled Virgil; can a man, who has read them all three, and knows they are translated into most of the European languages, thus debase a talent which has gained himself so much honour? I compared our Boileau and Racine to the author of the *Æneid*, for the beauty of the versification; because Virgil, had he been born at Paris, would have wrote in rhyme as they have done, and were they contemporaries of Horace and Augustus, they would have made the same use that Virgil did, of the measure of Latin verse. Mr. de la Motte therefore, when he calls versification a ridiculous mechanic operation, not only accuses of this ridicule all our great poets, but even all antiquity. Virgil and Horace subjected themselves to as mechanic an operation as our modern authors. A proper disposition of spondees and dactyles was

there is scarce a town or considerable convent, of which there are not elaborate memoirs drawn up, printed and forgot. The benedictine Monks are particularly remarkable for these huge compilations.

full as troublesome to find out as our rhymes or hemistichs. It must have been extremely laborious; for the *Æneid*, after eleven years study, was not yet brought to perfection.

Mr. de la Motte maintains, that at least a scene of tragedy put into prose loses nothing of its beauty or its force. To prove his assertion, he turns into prose the first scene of *Mithridates*; and it is no longer worth reading.

But he adds, "our neighbours have banished rhyme from their tragedies." It is very true; but their tragedies are in verse, because harmony is necessary and pleasing to every people. The question then consists in this, whether our French verses ought to be in rhyme or not. *Cornille* and *Racine* have employed rhyme: let us take care, that if we get into another road, it is not rather through an incapacity of following the steps of these great men, than for the sake of novelty. The Italians and English can do without rhyme, because their languages admit of transpositions, and that in their poetry they take several licences which we are debarred from. Every language possesses peculiar advantages determined by the nature and construction of its phrases, by the frequent use of its vowels or consonants, by its transposition, its auxiliary verbs, etc. The beauties of ours consist in its perspicuity and elegance; we allow no liberties in our poetry, which, like our prose, is to proceed in the direct order of the ideas. A return of the same sounds is therefore absolutely necessary with us, in or-

der to distinguish poetry from prose. Every body is acquainted with the following lines;

Où me cacher ? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.
Mais que dis-je ? Mon pere y tient l'urne fatal ;
Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains ;
Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles humains.

Let us take away the rhyme in this manner ;

Où me cacher ? Fuyons dans la nuit infernale.
Mais que dis-je ? Mon pere y tient l'urne funeste ;
Le sort, dit-on, l'a mise en ses sévères mains ;
Minos juge aux enfers tous les pâles mortels *

How poetic soever these lines are, yet do they afford the same pleasure when deprived of the charm of rhyme? The English and the Italians would say as well as the Greeks or Romans, *les pâles humains Minos aux enfers juge*, and would make one line run gracefully into the next. The very manner of reading verses in Italian and in English, marks the short and long syllables, which support the harmony without the necessity of rhyme. For our part, who have none of these advantages, why should we banish those which the nature of our language admits of?

Mr. de la Motte compares our poets, that is, our Corneilles, our Racines, our Boileaus, to

* The above lines are quoted merely to shew the particular character of the French poetry : a translation of them would therefore have served no sort of purpose.

writers of acrostics, or to quacks who pass grains of corn through the eye of a needle, and adds, that all these puerilities have no other merit but that merely of overcoming a difficulty.

I allow that bad verses are pretty much in this situation. They differ from bad prose only in the rhyme; and rhyme alone neither makes the merit of the poet, nor the entertainment of the reader. It is not mere spondees and dactyls that create delight in Virgil and Homer. But what charms every where is the fine harmony which results from this difficult measure. He must be a fool who contents himself with overcoming difficulties for the meer pleasure of gaining such a victory; but he that draws from these very obstacles, beauties that are universally pleasing, must be a man of exquisite parts and judgment. It is extremely difficult to draw fine pictures, to carve fine statues, to compose good music, or to write good verses, and therefore the name of the few great men who have surmounted all those obstacles, will probably last longer than the kingdoms where they were born.

I might take the liberty to dispute with Mr. de la Motte on some other points: but that perhaps would look like a design of attacking him personally, and make me suspected of malice towards him, which, in fact, I am as remote from, as I am from his opinions. I am much better pleased to avail myself of the ingenious observations he has interspersed in his book, than to undertake confuting some which I do not take to be so well founded as the rest. It is enough that I have

endeavour'd the defence of an art I am fond of, and which he ought to have defended himself.

I will add one word more, relative to an ode in favour of harmony, in which Mr. de la Faye attacks in fine poetry, the system of Mr. de la Motte, who has answered him only in prose. I will quote a single stanza which unites almost all the reasons that I have alleged in my favour:

De la contrainte rigoureuse
Où l'esprit semble resserré
Il reçoit cette force heureuse,
Qui l'élève au plus haut degré.
Telle, dans des canaux pressée,
Avec plus de force élancée,
L'onde s'élève dans les airs ;
Et la règle qui semble austère,
N'est qu'un art plus certain de plaire
Inséparable des beaux vers *.

Mr. de la Motte, who should have answered

* From these very rigorous laws,
By which we think ourselves restrain'd,
The mind it's strength and beauty draws,
And profiteth by being chain'd :
So, in narrower conduits prest,
Th' ascent of water's manag'd best,
Jetteaus form, so much in fashion.
The rules, which seem so very hard,
Are rules to please, which guide the bard
To poetry's perfection.

These English lines are inserted merely to give the sense of the original, without the least attempt to equal it in harmony or expression.

this just and graceful comparison by following the example of its author, enters into an enquiry whether the narrowness of the conduits contributes to the ascent of liquids, or whether that ascent is not, rather, in proportion to the height from which the waters first descend; and "Can we find, says he, in verse more than in prose, this primary elevation of thoughts, &c."

I believe Mr. de la Motte mistakes, as a philosopher; for it is certain, that without the constraint in which the water is held in pipes, it would not ascend, though it should have descended from ever so great an elevation; and I think he is still in a greater error as a poet; for, it is very plain, that as the constraint of versification causes that harmony which is pleasing to the ear; in like manner from the kind of prison in which the waters flow, jetteaus result, which are agreeable to the eye. Is not the comparison both just and pleasing? Mr. de la Faye certainly took a better method with Mr. de la Motte than I have done: He followed the example of an antient philosopher, who, in answer to a sophister that denied motion, began to walk in his presence. Mr. de la Motte denies the harmony of verses: a circumstance that alone should put me in mind to finish my prose.

On Elegance of Expression in Tragedy.

In the preface to Herod and Mariamne.*

I Tremble in giving this edition. I have remarked so many plays applauded on the stage, which have been afterwards despised in the cloister, that I am afraid lest mine should meet with the same fate. One or two interesting situations, the actors art, and the readings which I shewed to own and correct my faults, might have gained me some approbation, when it was acted. But many more qualifications are necessary to satisfy the cool deliberate reader. A plot regularly conducted will contribute but little to that end; and though it should be affecting, yet even that will not be sufficient: all poetical performances, though ever so perfect in other points,

* Mariamne was first acted in the year 1723. Baron, who was surnamed the *Æsop* of the French, performed the part of Herod; but he was then too old to support this vehement character. Adrienne Le Cœur, the best actress that ever existed, played the part of Mariamne. This princess was to die by poison which she was to take upon the stage. It was about the festival of the kings or twelfth night that this play first appeared, and a young coxcomb, who was in the pit, on seeing the empoisoned draught presented to Mariamne, took into his head to cry out, "the queen drinks †." All the Frenchmen began to laugh, and the piece was

must necessarily displease, if the lines are not strong and harmonious, and if there does not run through the whole a continued elegance and inexpressible charm of verse, that genius only can inspire, that wit alone can never attain, and about which, people have argued so ill, and to so little purpose, since the death of Boileau.

It is a very gross mistake to imagine that the versification is the least essential and least difficult part of a theatrical piece. Mr. Racine, than whom, after Virgil, no man ever knew better the art of versifying, was not of that opinion. His *Phædra* alone employed him for two years. Pardon boasted of having finished his in three months. As the success, at the acting of a play, does not depend so much on the stile, as on the plot and the actors performance; it happened

discontinued. It was given the next year, and the queen received another kind of death. The play ran forty nights.

Mr. Rousseau † who began to be zealous of the author, wrote at that time another *Mariamne* from *Tristan's* antient tragedy; he sent it to the players who could never act it; and to Didot the bookseller who could never sell it. This was the origin of the long variance that subsisted between our author and Rousseau. Voltaire.

† This alludes to a custom established in France of choosing a king by lot in every company on twelfth-night, who, on his part, names the queen. They often are at the expence of an entertainment, and both highly honoured during that night; when they drink, it is proclaimed aloud, and their example followed by all their loyal subjects.

† Not the present philosopher Rousseau, but another of the same name, whose reputation in poetry is very high among the French. His odes are remarkable fine.

that both Phædra's seemed to share the same fate; but on the reading, their difference was easily perceived, and their merits were soon settled in their proper classes. It was to no purpose that Pardon published, according to all bad authors, a very insolent preface, in which he abuses the critics of his piece; notwithstanding the praises it received from himself and from his cabal, it soon fell into that contempt which it deserves; and had it not been for the Phædra of Racine, it would not now be known that Pardon wrote one.

Yet what is the cause of this mighty difference between the two performances? The plot is pretty much the same in both plays; Phædra expires in each; Theseus is absent during the two first acts, and supposed to have travelled to hell with Pirithous; his son Hypolitus is resolved to quit Trezena, in order to shun Aricia whom he loves; he declares his passion to her, but is struck with horror at Phædra's love for him; he dies in the same manner, and his governor gives the same account of it. Besides, the personages of both plays being in the same situation, talk pretty much to the same purport; but this is what best distinguishes the great man from the bad poet. The difference between Pardon and Racine is never so conspicuous, as when their thoughts are most alike. Hypolitus's declaration to Aricia is a remarkable proof of this assertion. Racine makes Hypolitus speak in this manner:

Moi qui contre l'amour fierement révolte,
Aux fers de ces captifs ai long-temps insulté;

Qui des faibles mortels déplorant les naufrages,
 Pensois toujours du bord contempler les orages;
 Asservi maintenant sous la commune loi,
 Par quel trouble maintenant me vois-je emporté

[loin de moi?

Un moment a vaincu mon audace imprudente;
 Cette ame si superbe est enfin dépendante.
 Depuis pres de six mois honteux, desespéré,
 Portant partout le trait dont je suis déchiré,
 Contre vous, contre moi, vainement je m'éprouve,
 Présente je vous suis, absente je vous trouve.
 Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit,
 La lumiere du jour, les ombres de la nuit,
 Tout retrace à mes yeux les charmes que j'évite;
 Tout vous livre à l'envi le rebelle Hippolite.
 Moi-même pour tout fruit de mes soins superflus,
 Maintenant je me cherche, et ne me trouve plus.
 Mon arc, mes javelots, mon char, tout m'importune,
 Je ne me souviens plus des leçons de Neptune.
 Mes seuls gémissemens font retentir les bois,
 Et mes coursiers oisifs ont oublé ma voix *.

In Pardon's plays, Hypolitus expresses himself in the following manner:

Assez et torp. long-temps] d'une bouche profane,
 Je méprisai l'amour, et j'adorai Diane;
 Solitaire, farouche, on me voyoit toujours
 Chasser dans nos forêts les lions et les ours.

* The thought and sentiment being the same in these two speeches, their whole difference lying in the expression, the reader must allow that the attempt to convey that difference in a translation would be absurd.

Mais un soin plus pressant m'occupe et m'embarrasse ;
 Depuis que je vous vois, j'abandonne la chasse.
 Elle fit autrefois mes plaisirs les plus doux,
 Et quand j'y vais, ce n'est que pour penser à vous.

It is impossible to compare these two speeches without admiring the one, and laughing at the other. Yet the like thought and sentiments run through each; for when the passions are to be described, nearly the same ideas occur to every body; but it is in the expression of them that the man of genius is easily discerned from the wit, and the poet from the scribbler.

To attain to Mr. Racine's perfection in writing, a man must be possessed of his genius, and take as much pains as he did in finishing his works. What apprehensions must I be then under, who, born with slender parts, and continually afflicted with diseases, have neither an imagination to create many beauties, nor the liberty to correct my faults by constant labour and study! I am fully convinced of the many errors in the intrigue of this play, as well as in the diction. I should have corrected some, if this edition could have been retarded; but many must still have remained. There are certain limits in every art which we cannot go beyond. We are stopped by the weakness of our own talents. We spy perfection at a distance, and make but vain efforts to attain to it.

I shall not enter into any particular criticisms upon the play now published; my readers will do it sufficiently without my help. But I cannot avoid mentioning a general criticism that

has been made on the choice of the subject. As it is in the genius of the French to place the most serious matters in the most ridiculous light, they said, the story of this play was nothing more than "a brutish yet amorous old man, whose wife obstinately refuses to comply with his desires;" and added, that domestic strife can never be a proper subject for a tragedy. I beg leave to offer a few reflections on this prejudiced opinion.

All tragic pieces are founded either on the interests of a nation, or on the particular interest of princes. Of the former kind, are *Iphigenia in Aulis*, in which, Greece assembled demands the blood of the child of *Agamemnon*: the *Horatii*, where three combatants have in their hands the fate of Rome: *Oedipus*, where the safety of the Thebans depends on the discovery of the murder of *Laius*. Of the latter kind, are *Britannicus*, *Phaedra*, *Mithridates*, etc.

In these three last pieces the whole interest is confined to the family of the hero who is represented. The whole depends on passions which are equally felt by all mankind, and the intrigue is as proper for comedy as for tragedy. Change only the names, and *Mithridates* is but only an old man in love with a young girl, who is also passionately beloved by his two sons; and he makes use of a low stratagem to find out which of the two is his happy rival. *Phaedra* is a mother-in-law, who emboldened by her confidante discovers her passion to her son-in-law who happens to be engaged elsewhere. *Nero* is an impetuous young man, who becomes enamoured on

a sudden, resolves immediately to get a divorce from his wife, and hides behind some hangings to listen to his mistress's conversation. These are all subjects which Moliere might have handled as well as Racine. And, in fact, the intrigue of the miser is exactly the same with that of Mithridates. Harpagon and the king of Pontus are two amorous old men; both have their sons for rivals; both contrive in the same manner to find out the correspondence that subsists between their son and mistress; and both plays conclude with the marriage of the young fellows.

Moliere and Racine have equally succeeded in handling this subject: the one amuses and diverts; the other moves us with terror and compassion. Moliere exposes the ridiculous fondness of an old miser: Racine describes the foibles of a great king, and makes them even venerable. Let a wedding be drawn by Vateau and le Brun: One will represent peasants under an arbour full of genuine and unbounded joy, at a rustic meal, where reign immoderate laughter, riot and drunkenness: the other, on the contrary, will paint the nuptials of Thetis and Peleus, the festivals of gods, and their majestic joy: and both arrive at the perfection of their art by different roads.

We may apply these different examples to Mariamne. The ill-humour of a wife, the fondness of an old husband, the disturbances caused by a sister-in-law, are in themselves of little importance, and well adapted to the comic scene. But a king whom all the world have

agreed to call a great man, deeply enamoured of the finest woman of the universe; the vehement passion of this sovereign, so famous for his virtues and for his crimes, for his former cruelties, and for his present remorse; this continual and rapid transition from love to hatred, from hatred back to love; the ambition of his sister; the intrigues of his ministers; the grievous situation of a princess whose beauty and virtues are still celebrated in the world, who saw her father and her brother condemned to death by her own husband, and to complete her misfortunes, was beloved by the murderer of her family. — What a vast field? what a scope for a man of happier parts than I have? can such a subject be deemed unworthy of tragedy? It is in these instances, that it can be truly said, that things change their name according to the appearance they are placed in.

OF SIMPLICITY in TRAGEDY, etc.

ADDRESSED

To Sir EVERARD FALKENER,

An English merchant *.

Prefixed to the TRAGEDY of ZARA †.

YOU are an Englishman, my dear friend, and I was born in France; but all who love the arts are fellow-citizens. Thinking people have pretty much the same principles every where, and form but one republic. Therefore, it is no more extraordinary now-a-days, to see a

* Afterwards ambassador at Constantinople.

† Those who love literary anecdotes will be well pleased to know upon what occasion this play was wrote. Several ladies upbraided our author with not admitting love into his tragedies. He answered, that if sighing heroes were absolutely necessary, he also would introduce them on the stage. This piece was undertaken in consequence of this promise, and finished in eighteen days. It met with great success, and is called at Paris the Christian tragedy. They often act it there in the room of Corneille's Polyuctes or Christian hero.

French tragedy inscribed to an Englishman or to an Italian, than it was formerly that a citizen of Ephesus or of Athens should address his works to a Greek of some other town. I offer you then, Sir, this tragedy as to my countryman in literature, and as to my intimate friend.

I take this opportunity also to acquaint the French nation with how much consideration merchants are regarded in England, and the great esteem in which is held there, a profession that causes the grandeur of the state; and with what eminence some among them represent their country in parliament, and are in the rank of legislators.

I know that this profession is despised by some of our coxcombs; but *you* know also, that your coxcombs and ours are the most ridiculous animals, that proudly creep on the surface of the earth.

Another reason which induces me to talk on the Belles-Lettres with an Englishman, rather than with any other, is your happy liberty of thinking; which communicates itself to my mind, and emboldens my thoughts when with you. The man that converses with me, seems to dispose of my mind: if he feels with ecstacy, he enflames me, and if he thinks with strength, my thoughts get vigour. A dissembling courtier communicates to me his diffidence and constraint; but a mind free and without fear, encourages me not to cramp the progress of my thoughts, nor put a stop to the flights of my imagination; I glow with his fire. Thus a

young painter instructed under Coypel * and Argiliere †, soon makes the touches of his guides familiar to himself, and imperceptibly follows their spirit and manner in his own compositions. And it is on this account that Virgil made it his duty to admire Homer; he followed the path the Grecian bard had traced, and became his rival without becoming his plagiarist.

Do not imagine that I shall make a long apology in favour of the tragedy I send you; I might mention why I did not give Zara a more determined vocation to Christianity before she knew her father; and why she hides her secrets from her lover, etc. but wise minds who love to do justice, will easily see many reasons without my mentioning them; and as for the critics who are resolved not to give credit to my arguments, it would be lost time to endeavour to satisfy them.

I shall only value myself on writing a piece which is tolerably simple, a merit to be considered on many accounts. This happy simplicity was remarkable in the learned ancients. Let this novelty be introduced into your pieces; let there be greater truth, a nearer imitation of nature, and nobler images on your theatre, which is at present disgraced with gibbets and legerdemain. Addison has already attempted it; he was the poet of the wise; but he was too affected; Portia and Marcia, in his boasted Cato, are

* † French painters of great reputation, especially the first.

certainly too very insipid personages. Imitate the great Addison only in what he excels; correct the rude action of your wild Melpomene's; write for the men of taste of every place and every age, and introduce into your writings the simplicity of your manners.

I hope the English poets will not imagine I mean to offer Zara as a model to them to write from. I recommend a natural simplicity, and easy verse; and, in that, I do not at all intend my own panegyric. If Zara has met with some success, it is less owing to the goodness of the piece, than to the care I take to talk of love in the most tender and affecting manner I could. In that, I flattered the taste of my auditors, knowing the best way to succeed, is to address men's passions rather than their reason. Though good Christians we are, yet we must have love; and I am persuaded it was very happy for Corneille that he did not satisfy himself in his Polyeuctes with having the statues of Jupiter broke in peices by the Neophites; for such is the corruption of mankind, that perhaps the great soul of Polyeuctes would have made but little impression, and the christian-like lines which he repeats would have been forgot, but for his wife's passion for her pagan favourite, who, by the way, deserved her love much better than her devotee of a husband.

Such was the case of Zara. Every body that frequents plays assured me, that if she had been but merely converted, the audience would have been but little affected; but she was up to the eyes in love; and that is what has made her for-

tune. Yet I am far from having being extempe from criticisms. The most slender omissions were observed and censured. Many unmercifully insisted that I spoiled and ill-explained a very improbable tale, born in my own brain; that the subject was curtailed, and the end improper. It was foretold me, that I should be recompensed with the dreadful hissing with which the disappointed public salutes a wretched author. I laughed at their ill-founded censure, and ventured my drama on the stage; the favourable audience instead of hissing applauded; I even perceived some tears drop from the finest eyes, and moisten the most lovely cheeks. Such wished-for success did not encrease my pride, as I was conscious in myself of the many faults that still remained in Zara. I knew it impossible to write a perfect play without a contract with the d———, and that I have not made.

I dare not flatter myself that the English will do to Zara the honour they did to Brutus, of translating and acting it on the theatre of London. You have here the reputation of not being devout enough to be much concerned for the old Lusignan, nor tender enough to be affected by Zara. You pass for being better pleased with an intrigue of conspirators than with an intrigue of lovers. It is thought that on your theatre the word COUNTRY, as on ours the word LOVE, raises the highest applause; but the truth is, that you introduce love, as well as we do, in your tragedies. If you have not the reputation of being tenderly inclined, it is not, that the heroes of your theatre are not amorous, but

because the manner of expressing their passion is seldom natural. Our lovers speak as such; but yours, as yet, speak only the language of poets.

If you will allow the French to be your masters in gallantry, there are many things in recompence which we might learn from you. It is to the English theatre that I am indebted for the boldness I have had to introduce on the French stage the names of our kings, and of the ancient families of the kingdom. I think this might be the source of a new kind of tragedy hitherto unknown to, though necessary for, us. Some happy genius will probably arise to carry this idea to perfection, which Zara is but a sketch of. As long as literature continues to be encouraged in France, we shall not want for writers of merit. Nature almost always forms men of every kind of talent; it only remains to protect and employ them. But if those, who distinguish themselves, are not encouraged by some honourable recompence, and the flattering incitement of reputation and esteem, all the fine arts may very possibly decay sometime or other in the midst of the precautions which had been taken to maintain and support them; and these trees, planted by Lewis the fourteenth, may degenerate through want of culture. The public will have taste, but no great masters will be found. The sculptor will see but people of ordinary abilities in his academy*, and will not raise his

* There is an academy at Paris of painting and sculpture, which has given rise to many great masters in both arts.

thoughts to Girardon * or to Puget †; the painter will be satisfied to think himself superior to his neighbour, and never strive to equal or excel le Poussin ‡. I hope the successors of Lewis the fourteenth may follow the example of that great king, who with a look created a noble emulation among the several artists. He encouraged at the same time a Racine and a Vanrobés. He carried our commerce and our glory beyond the Indies. His favours extended to foreigners, who were surprized, at being known to, and recompensed by, our court. Whatever merit was to be found, it had its protector in Lewis the fourteenth. His royal hand distributed honour and profit without solicitation or without cabals. Guillelmini §, Viviani § and the heaven-studying Cassini, were attracted at his court, and some great pension would have robbed you of your Sir Isaac Newton, if it had been possible to purchase him. These were the real successes which have done immortal honour to the name of Lewis and of France. He was the model of all Europe. It was apprehended that he aimed at universal monarchy, and he really obtained it by his munificence.

You do not possess monuments of the bounty of your kings equal to those of ours; but your nation makes amends; with you the fa-

* † The two greatest sculptors France ever possessed.

‡ A celebrated French painter, whose compositions are distinguished from those of other masters by the name of the *learned paintings of le Poussin*.

§ § Italian mathematicians.

vourable regards of the monarch are not necessary in order to recompense great talents of every kind. Sir Richard Steele, and Sir John Vanbrugh were at the same time comic authors and members of parliament. The primacy of doctor Tillotson, the embassy of Mr. Prior, Sir Isaac Newton's employment, Mr. Addison's secretaryship, are but the common consequences of the regard and esteem, in which men of superior parts are held among you. They are enriched by you during their lives, and on their decease, you erect them monuments and statues. Even your celebrated actresses are placed in the churches next to your famous poets. Mrs. Bracegirdle and Mrs. Oldfield, who both succeeded in the great art to please, as soon as their course was over, were honourably conducted to the eternal resting-place of all your lettered republic: while our divine Moliere, who much better deserved such honours, could hardly obtain the cold satisfaction of being placed in a common church-yard; and the amiable le Couvreur, whose eyes I closed, was denied the accustomed ceremony of a burial. This person, *formerly* so honoured and so much admired, was *now* through charity thrown into a hackney coach, and carried to the banks of the river Seine, where she lies interred. Does not the God of love seem to strike with anger and with horror at this relation, and breaking his arrows fly away? does not Melpomene in tears abandon and depart the ungrateful spot which she so long adorned with her noble charms.

Every thing seems to bring back the French to that barbarism from which we were raised by Lewis the fourteenth and cardinal Richelieu. Woe to the politicians who do not know the value of the fine arts! The earth is covered with nations as powerful as we are. How comes it, notwithstanding, that we look upon almost all of them with little esteem? It is for the same reason that in society we despise a rich man without taste or education. Above all things, do not imagine that this empire of the mind, this honour of being the model to other nations is a frivolous advantage. It is an infallible mark of the grandeur of an empire: it has been always under the greatest princes, that arts have flourished, and their decline has sometimes been the epoch of that of the state. History is full of such examples. But this subject would lead me too far: Adieu, my good friend; continue cultivating the Belles Lettres and philosophy, without forgetting to send ships to the Mediterranean.

Delicacy and Decency in Tragedy, etc.

**In a Second Letter to Sir EVERARD FAIR-
KENER, Ambassador at Constantinople.**

Taken from the Second Edition of ZARA.

MY dear friend; for your new dignity of ambassador renders our friendship only more respectable, and does not hinder me from making use of a title more sacred than that of a public minister. The name of *Friend* is much superior to that of *Excellence*.

I dedicate to the ambassador of a great king, and of a free nation, the same work which I dedicated to the private citizen, the English merchant.

They who know to what point commerce is honoured in your country, know also, that a merchant there is sometimes a legislator, a good officer, a public minister.

Some people, depraved by the base custom of paying homage to grandeur alone, strove to throw a ridicule on the novelty of a dedication to a man who then had only merit on his side. They had the impudence to insult on a stage

consecrated to false taste and to detraction *, the author of that dedication, and the man who received it; they had the impudence to upbraid him with being a merchant. You must not impute to our nation so great a barbarity, which the most unpolished nations would be ashamed of. The magistrates, who, among us, are entrusted with the care of our manners, and who are continually busied in suppressing scandalous practices, were, on this occasion, deceived. But the contempt and horror of the public for the known author of this base attempt, are fresh instances of the politeness of the French.

The virtues which adorn and form the character of a people are often contradicted by the faults of some particular persons. There were some voluptuous men at Sparta. There are low and giddy minds in England. Athens was not exempt from tasteless unpolished barbarians, and there are some still to be found in Paris.

Let us forget them, as they are forgot by the public; and accept this second homage. It is more naturally due to an Englishman, as this tragedy has been lately embellished at London. It has been translated and acted with so much success, I have been mentioned on your stage with so much kindness and civility, that I owe these public thanks to your nation for it.

* There was a low farce acted on the Italian comic theatre at Paris, in which several persons of merit were grossly insulted; and among the rest, Sir Everard Falkener. The public treated this undertaking with all the dislike and contempt it deserved. Voltaire.

I cannot do more, I believe, for the honour of literature, than to relate here to my countrymen the particulars of the translation and representation of Zara on the theatre of London.

Mr. Hill, a man of letters, and who seems to understand the stage better than any other English writer, did me the honour to translate the piece, with an intent to introduce on your scene some novelties both in the manner of writing tragedies and in the delivery of them. I shall speak first of the acting.

The art of acting with you was somewhat distant from nature. Most of your tragic authors expressed themselves rather as enthusiastic poets than as men affected by passion. Several of the players pushed this fault still farther; they used to repeat the bombastic lines with a fury and vehemence that is to nature, as convulsions are to a noble and easy gait.

This air of forwardness is quite foreign to your nation, which is naturally reserved; and this reservedness is sometimes taken for coldness by foreigners. Your preachers never take upon them the manner of orators; and a lawyer would be laughed at in Westminster-hall, who should grow warm in his client's cause. Your actors alone were allowed to rant. Our Paris actors and especially our actresses were guilty of this fault some years ago: it was mademoiselle le Couvreur that corrected them. This same change which mademoiselle le Couvreur brought about on our scene, Mrs. Cibber has just introduced on yours in the part of Zara. Strange!

that in all the arts it must be after much lost time that we come at last to what is natural and simple. Another novelty, which will be more surprising to the French, is, that an English gentleman of fortune was not above acting on your theatre the part of Osman*. It was in-

* It was easy, says Mr. Hill, to induce Osman (as he is a relation of my own, and but too fond of the amusement) to make trial, how far his delight, in an art I shall never allow him to practise, might enable him to supply one part of the proof, that, to imitate nature, we must proceed upon natural principles. At the same time, it happened that Mrs. Cibber was, fortunately, inclinable to exert her inimitable talent, in additional aid of my purpose, with view to continue the practice of a profession, for which, her person, her voice, the unaffected sensibility of her heart, and her face, so finely disposed for assuming and expressing the passions, have so naturally qualified her. Preface to the English tragedy of Zara.

Theatrical performances have, indeed, often been exhibited entirely by persons of the first fashion, and with success; but in these representations, the apparatus of a regular theatre has been wanting, and the whole has been greatly hurt by that deficiency. The present age, perhaps, is the first, that ever produced so rare an incident as a play performed on the *public stage*, by persons of distinction. A set of gentlemen, celebrated for their taste, and spirit in gallantry, who were determined to give their acquaintance an uncommon entertainment, and to do it in an uncommon manner, performed the tragedy of Othello, March 7, 1751, at Drury-Lane theatre. The character of Othello was played by the elder Mr. Delaval; Iago and Cassio by the second Mr. Delaval and a younger brother; Desdemona by Mrs. Quon; Roderigo by captain Stevens; Emilia by that gentleman's lady; Lodovico by Mr. Pine. They hired

interesting enough to see the two principal personages represented, one by a man of rank, and the other by a young actress of eighteen who had never repeated a line in her life.

This example of a gentleman who has publicly made use of his abilities in acting, is not the first among you. The only thing that is odd, is, that we should be surprized at it. We should remember that every thing in this world depends on custom and opinion. The French court have danced on the stage with the actors of the opera, and it has only been wondered at, why this sort of amusement has been discontinued. Why should it appear more surprising to act, than to dance in public? Is there any other difference between these two arts, except that the first is as much above the last, as the talents of the mind are superior to those of the body. I still repeat it, and I shall always think, that none of the fine arts are despicable, and what is real-

the theatre for the night; they gave among their friends as many tickets as would fill it; and exhibited their performance with all the pomp and decoration of the most regular concerted entertainment of the kind. The royal family did them the honour of filling the stage boxes, and every corner of the house shone with diamonds and embroidery. The tickets expressed no particular place, so that those only that came first had the advantage of the best seats: by this means the whole house was filled with equally good company; and stars glittered for the first, and probably the last, time in the shilling gallery. The dresses, and expence of the house, which was generally one hundred and fifty pounds, amounted to above one thousand.

ly ignominious, is, to throw ignominy on any talent.

Let us come now to the translation of Zara, and to the change that has been lately made on your stage, in the art of dramatic poetry.

A custom prevailed among you, to which even Mr. Addison subjected himself, though the wisest of your writers; so much does custom take place of reason and of law! It consisted in finishing every act with verses of a different nature from the rest of the play, and these verses necessarily contained a simile. Phaedra, leaving the stage, poetically compares herself to a hind; Cato to a rock; Cleopatra to infants, who cry till they are lulled asleep.

The translator of Zara is the first, who dared maintain the right of nature against a taste so foreign to it.

He banished this unreasonable custom, persuaded that the language of passion should be natural, and that the hero, not the poet, should be constantly seen by the spectators.

It is from this principle, that he has translated in a plain and unaffected stile, all these simple verses of the original, which would have been spoiled by an attempt to make them shine with brilliancy of wit or fancy; such are the following lines;

Joys, which we do not know, we do not wish;

Born beyond Ganges, I had been a Pagan;

In France, a Christian; — I am, here, a Saracen:

But Osman lov'd me — and I've lost it all.

I talk not of a scepter, which he gives me:

No — to be charm'd with that, were thanks,
too humble!

Offensive tribute, and, too poor, for love!

I should believe, you hated, had you power

To love, with moderation.

— — — Art was made

For Zara; — Art, however innocent,

Looks like deceiving:

All these lines are translated word for word. It would not have been difficult to set them off; but the translator differed in this point from some of my countrymen. He chose, and he rendered into his own tongue, all the native simplicity of these verses. And indeed the style must be always adapted to the subject. Alzira, Brutus, and Zara required, for example, three different sorts of versification.

If Berenice complained of Titus, and Ariadne of Theseus, in the style of Cinna; Berenice and Ariadne would not affect the audience,

Love will never be expressed, if other beauties are desired than nature and truth.

The question is not here to be determined, whether we should admit so much love in our dramatic performances? I agree that it is a fault; but it is, and it ever will be, an univer-

ful one; and I do not know what name to give to faults that charm mankind.

One thing certain is, that in this defect, (if it may be so called) the French have succeeded better than all other nations, antient or modern. Love appears on our stage with a decency, a truth, a delicacy, that is not to be found elsewhere; the reason of it is, the French nation has made greater progress than any other in the knowledge of society.

The constant intercourse held up with liveliness and civility between the two sexes, has introduced in France a politeness less known elsewhere.

Society depends upon the women. Every people, unhappy enough to confine them, is unsociable. Your manners which were yet austere, your political quarrels, and religious wars, deprived you, till the reign of Charles the second, of the sweets of society even in the midst of liberty. Your poets therefore could not be acquainted with the manner in which love is treated by people of delicacy and refinement.

Good comedy was unknown before Moliere appeared, as the art of expressing true delicate sentiments, was unknown until Racine began to write; because society was not till then in its highest perfection. A poet in his closet cannot paint those manners which he has not seen; it is easier to write an hundred odes, or an hundred epistles, than one scene in which nature is to speak.

Your Dryden, who was really a great genius, yet puts constantly in the mouth of his amorous

heroes, either by hyperboles, or rhetoric, or indecent expressions, both equally contrary to real tenderness.

Racine makes Titus say:

Depuis cinq ans entiers chaque jour je la vois ;

Et crois toujours la voir pour la premiere fois.

For five long years I've seen her every day ;

And yet I think the last, the first I see her.

But your Dryden goes still farther, and makes Antony express his passion in the following manner.

How I loved

Witness, ye days and nights, and all ye hours,

That danc'd away with down upon your feet,

As all your bus'ness were to count my passion.

One day past by, and nothing saw but love ;

Another came, and still 'twas only love :

The suns were weary'd out with looking on,

And I untir'd with loving.

It is difficult to imagine that Antony did really hold such a discourse to Cleopatra. In the same piece Cleopatra thus speaks to Marc Antony :

Come to me, come, my soldier, to my arms,

You've been too long away from my embraces ;

But, when I have you fast, and all my own,

With broken murmurs, and with am'rous sighs,

I'll say you were unkind, and punish you,
And mark you red with many an eager kiss.

It is extremely probable that Cleopatra often talked in this manner: but such indecencies ought not to be presented to a respectable audience.

It is in vain that some of your country-men will cry out, "This is nature:" They are to be answered, that this state of nature is the very thing we must veil with care. It does not even shew a knowlege of the human heart to imagine that the method to please, is to introduce such licentious imagery. On the contrary, it excludes true delight from the soul. When every thing is seen at the first glance, one is immediately satisfied.

As there remains nothing more to seek for or desire, we become languid where we thought to arrive at the height of joy. And in the pursuit of the contrary method, polite people enjoy a variety of pleasures, of which the grosser part of mankind have not the least conception.

The spectators in the former case are like lovers, whom a too ready compliance with their desires, disgusts. The greatest caution must be used in covering those ideas, which would raise a blush, if presented in an open manner. It is this veil in which consist the pleasures of delicacy; they feel none, where decency is not preserved.

The French have introduced this rule before other nations, not because they are void of genius and courage to undertake, as the unequal and impetuous Dryden ridiculously pretends, but

because since the regency of Anne of Austria, they have been the most sociable and polished people of the earth: and this politeness is not a meer arbitrary custom, like what we call civility; it is a law of nature that they happily have cultivated more than the rest of mankind. The translator of *Zara* has generally respected these theatrical decencies, which ought to be as common to you as to us: but in some instances he has yet followed ancient prejudice.

For example, in the English translation when *Osman* declares to *Zara*, that his love for her is gone, she answers by throwing herself on the ground. The sultan is not affected at seeing her in this posture of ridicule and of despair, yet the next moment he is struck at seeing her shed tears, and says:

Zara! you weep!

He should have rather said before,

Zara! you throw yourself upon the ground!

And indeed these words, *Zara! you weep!* which had a very great effect on our theatre, were productive of none on yours, because they were there misplaced. These familiar, simple expressions, derive their whole force from the manner in which they are introduced. "You change colour, my lord," is very little when considered by itself, and yet, the moment these simple words are pronounced in *Racine's Mithridates*, every spectator is struck with terror.

To say nothing but what is proper to be said, and that too in the proper manner, is a merit, to which the French, myself excepted, seem to have nearer attained, than the writers of other countries. It is relative to this art, that our nation, I think, deserves to be believed. You teach us things of greater use and importance. It would be shameful in us not to allow it. The French, who have wrote against Sir Isaac Newton's discoveries in optics, now are sorry for it. And those who are still enemies to his system of attraction, must soon also acknowledge their error.

You ought to agree to the rules of our theatre, as we ought to embrace your philosophy. We have made as good experiments on the human heart, as you have made in natural philosophy. The art to please seems appropriated to the French, as the art of thinking belongs to the English. Happy the man, who like you, Sir, unites both, etc.

OF THE
ADVANTAGE OF LITERATURE
TO LADIES OF QUALITY.

In a letter to the Marchioness du CHASTE-
LET, on sending her the Tragedy of
ALZIRA,

MADAM,

IT is paying you but a poor tribute, to lay at
your feet a poetic performance, which flour-
ishes but a moment, whose merit consists in the
transitory indulgence of the public, and the illus-
ion of the theatre; afterwards doomed to mix
in the croud, and be forgot.

What is, in fact, a novel put into action and
verse, in the eyes of a person, who reads the
works of geometers with the same ease that
others read romances? what is it to her, who
has found in Locke, the sage preceptor of man-
kind, her own sentiments, and the history of
her own thoughts; and who, born to partake
of the delights of the world, yet prefers truth to
every thing? But, madam, the greatest geni-
us, and certainly the most desirable, is that,

which excludes none of the fine arts. They all are the nourishment and the pleasure of the mind: is there therefore any which we should not cultivate and approve? Happy the mind that is not parched up with the study of philosophy, nor enervated by the charms of the Belles-Lettres; which can be strengthened by Locke, instructed by Clarke and Newton, elevated by the reading of Cicero and of Bossuet *, and adorned by the beauties of Virgil and of Tasso.

Such, madam, is your genius; I must not fear to say it, though you dread to hear it. Your example must encourage persons of your sex and rank to think, that they may be still more ennobled by improving their reason, and that wit is an ornament to them. There was a time in France, and even all over Europe, when gentlemen thought it beneath their dignity, and women thought it beyond their sphere, to seek for knowledge. The first looking on themselves as born for war or for idleness, and the latter for dress and coquetry. The ridicule which even Moliere and Boileau threw on learned women, seemed, in a polished age, to justify the prejudices of barbarism.

But Moliere, that legislator in the morals and decencies of the world, certainly did not pretend, when he exposed female pedantry, to laugh at wit or learning. He only attacks the

* A French bishop, famous for his great eloquence, genius, and learning, as well as for his controversy with the Protestants of France, and his disputes with his brother bishop Fencelon, author of *Telemachus*.

abuse and affectation of them; as in his *Tartuffe*, he attacks hypocrisy but not virtue. Instead of writing a satire against women, if the exact, the solid, the laborious, the elegant Boileau, had consulted some of the most ingenious ladies at court, he would have added to the art and merit of his works, some flowers and graces, which would have given them still greater charms. In vain has he strove, in his satire against women, to ridicule a lady of rank who had learned astronomy. He would have done better to have learned it himself. Philosophic genius has made so great a progress in France these forty years past, that, if Boileau were still alive, he, who took upon him to ridicule a woman of fashion, because she conversed privately with Roberval and Sauveur*, would be obliged to respect and imitate those, who profit publicly of the knowledge of the Maupertuis†, the Reaumur‡, the Mairan§.

* Two excellent mathematicians in the time of Lewis the XIVth.

† Well known for his great knowledge in the mathematics; as well as of the belles-lettres; for his journey to Lapland, to measure a meridian of the earth; and for having been a great favourite of the present king of Prussia, as well as president of his academy at Berlin. He died in the year 1758.

‡ One of the most diligent and accurate observers of nature in its minutest operations. His history of insects is a complete work. He improved and perfected the Egyptian method of hatching of eggs, by the means of artificial heat, or fire. He died in the year 1756.

§ A very ingenious philosopher and polite writer. He has been secretary to the academy of sciences of Paris.

the Dufays *, the Clairauts †; those truly learned men, whose object is useful science, and who, by making it agreeable, render it by degrees really necessary to our nation. We are arrived at the period, I dare say it, in which a poet must be a philosopher, and in which a woman may be one publicly.

In the beginning of the last age, the French learned the arrangement of *words*. The age of *things* is now arrived. She who read formerly Montaigne, Astraea, and the tales of the queen of Navarre, was reckoned learned. The Deshoulières ‡ and the Dacier §, both famous in their way, have since flourished. But your sex has derived still greater honour from those whom Fontenelle thought worthy to write his plurality of worlds for, and Algarotti his dialogues on light, a work perhaps equal to the first. It is true, a woman, who abandons the duties of her condition, to cultivate the sciences, is culpable even in her successes; but, madam, the same disposi-

* An excellent botanist and chemist, director of the royal garden of plants at Paris, and member of the academy of sciences.

† One of the greatest mathematicians and astronomers of the present age. His calculations of the motion of the moon, are much esteemed, as well as those relative to the return of the comets.

‡ A most amiable female poet; her works are full of that wit and delicacy peculiar to the sex.

§ A lady remarkable for her knowledge and fondness for the Greek, from which she translated several books. Her husband was as great a Grecian as she was; and indeed they became the two greatest pedants of the last age.

tion of mind which guides to the knowledge of truth, leads us also to the fulfilling of our duty.

The queen of England, consort to George the second, who became mediatrix between the two greatest metaphysicians of Europe, Clarke and Leibnitz, and who was able to judge their differences, yet did not neglect a moment the cares of a queen, a wife, or a mother.

Christina of Sweden, who quitted a throne for the fine arts, was ranked among the greatest princes while she reigned. Does not the grand-daughter of the great * Conde, in whom her grandfather's genius is revived, add a new lustre to the blood from which she is sprung?

You, madam, whose name may be mentioned with that of princes, do learning the same honour. You cultivate all the branches of literature. They are your occupation in the age of gaiety and pleasure, and yet you hide this merit, foreign to the world, with as much care as you have acquired it. Continue, madam, to cherish, to dare to cultivate the sciences, though this light, long inclosed in your own breast, has at last spread itself abroad, notwithstanding all

* So is called in France the prince of Condé, who, in the beginning of Lewis the fourteenth's reign, won three battles before he was eighteen years of age. He afterwards quitted the king, who was his cousin, to join the Parisians that had revolted, but was beat by Turenne, and obliged to fly to Spain, by whose mediation Lewis forgave, but never forgot, his cousin's rising in rebellion against him. His grand-daughter here-mentioned, was the late duchess of Maine.

the efforts you made to keep it secret. Should they who have long in private distributed their bounties, renounce that virtue, because it is become publicly known?

And why blush for one's merit? A cultivated mind is an additional beauty. It is another empire. The protection of sovereigns is sought for the arts. Is not that of beauty still superior?

Give me leave to add, that another reason for esteeming women who cultivate their minds, is, that their taste alone determines them to do so. They only seek for new entertainment, and so far they are praise-worthy.

As for us men, it is often through vanity, and sometimes through interest, that we spend our days in the study of the arts. We make them the instruments of our fortune; it is a kind of profanation. I am sorry that Horace says of himself;

Bold fortune edg'd, and want inspir'd my muse.

Francis's translation.

The rust of envy, the artifice of intrigues, the poison of calumny, the assassination of satire, (if I may make use of such a phrase) dishonour, among men, a profession which, in itself, has something really divine.

For my part, who, from my infancy, was determined to the arts by an irresistible propension, I began early to revolve these words, which

* *Paupertas impulit audax*

Ut versus facerem.

I have often repeated to you, from Cicero, that father of his country, of liberty, and of eloquence. " Learning forms youth, and charms old age. It is an ornament to us in prosperity, and in adversity a comfort. It accompanies us at home or abroad, in company or in solitude; and in every place, in every stage of life, it contributes to our happiness."

I have always loved literature for itself; but now, madam, I cultivate it for you, to deserve, if possible, the happiness of passing the remainder of my days near you, in the midst of retirement, of peace, and, perhaps, of truth; to which you sacrifice in your youth the false, but enchanting pleasures of the world; in a word, to be able to say one day with Lucretius that poetical philosopher, whose beauties and errors are so well known to you,

Above all 'tis pleasantest to get
The top of high philosophy, and sit
On the calm, peaceful, flourishing head of it;
Whence we may view, deep, wond'rous deep below,
How poor mistaken mortals wand'ring go,
Seeking the path to happiness; some aim
At learning, wit, nobility, or fame;
Others, with cares and dangers vex each hour,
To reach the top of wealth and sovereign power.
Blind, wretched man! * Creech's translation.

I shall add nothing to this long epistle relative to the tragedy which I have done myself

* Sed nil dulcius est, bene quam munita tenere
Edita doctrina Sapientum Tempia serena,

the honour to dedicate to you. How is it possible, madam, to speak of it, after speaking of you! All I can say, is, that I wrote it at your house, and under your directions. I strove to render it less unworthy of you, by introducing into it, novelty, truth, and virtue. I have endeavoured to delineate that generous sentiment, that humane disposition, of soul, which does good to all men, and forgives their offences; these sentiments so strongly recommended by the sages of antiquity, and so much refined in our religion, these real laws of nature which have been always so little observed. You have corrected many faults in this performance, and you are conscious of the imperfections that still remain. May the public, the more severe to me, as it has been already the more indulgent, excuse these imperfections as you have done!

May at least this homage which I pay you, madam, last longer than my other writings! It would be immortal if it were worthy of the person to whom it is addressed.

I am with profound respect,

Madam,

Your most obedient, and

Most humble Servant,

DE VOLTAIRE.

Despicere unde queas alios, passimque videre,

Errare, atque viam palantibus quærere vitæ,

Certare ingenio, contendere nobilitate,

Noctes atque dies niti præstante labore,

Ad summas emergere opes, rerumque potiri,

O miseras hominum mentes! O pectora cæca!

Of ENVY that attends MERIT and SUCCESS in LITERATURE.

In a Preliminary Discourse to the Tragedy of ALZIRA.

THE author has endeavoured, in the following tragedy, which is of pure invention, and wrote in a new manner, to shew how much the true spirit of religion is superior to the virtues of nature. The religion of a barbarian consists in offering to his gods the blood of his enemies. A Christian, ill instructed, is often as unjust: to be a strict observer of useless ceremonies, and negligent of the whole duties of man; to repeat certain prayers, and preserve his vices; to fast, but continue to hate, to cabal, to persecute; such is his religion. * That of a true christian commands him to look upon all men as his brethren, to do them all the good he can, and to pardon them when they offer him an injury.

Such is Gusman † at the hour of his death; such is Alvarez ‡ in the whole course of his life;

* It is obvious that monsieur de Voltaire, in this passage, alludes particularly to the Roman-catholic religion.

† † Characters in Alzira, one of Monsieur de Voltaire's finest tragedies.

such have I represented Henry the fourth, even in the midst of his weaknesses. Most of my writings respire this humane disposition, which should be the chief character of a thinking being. They all shew, if I may so express myself, the desire of the happiness of mankind, the horror of injustice and of oppression; and it is this alone, which has rescued my writings from that oblivion, to which their many faults naturally condemned them. It is on this account that the *Henriade* * has held up against the repeated efforts of some zealous Frenchmen, who were absolutely resolved that France should not produce an epic poem.

There are always a few readers who suffer not their judgment to be biased by the venom of cabal or intrigues, who love truth, and who look for the man in the author. Such are the persons in whom I met with favour. To such I offer the following reflections; I hope they will forgive the necessity I am under to publish them.

* A foreigner one day in Paris expressed his surprise at the load of libels which continually appeared in public, and the cruel outrages that were daily levelled against one man. It is probable, says he, this is some ambitious person, who would fain possess himself of one of those em-

* An epic poem, wrote by monsieur de Voltaire when he was confined in the Bastille. It is compared by many French and foreign readers, to the best poems of antiquity, and by a few it is thought superior to any.

ployments which stir up the common desires and envy of mankind. No, it was answered him, he is an obscure subject, retired from the world, who lives more with Virgil and Locke, than with his countrymen, and whose face is as little known to some of his enemies, as to the man who pretended to engrave his picture. He is author of some pieces which have forced tears from your eyes, and of some other works, in which, notwithstanding their many defects, one is pleased with that spirit of humanity, of justice, and of liberty, which runs through them all. Those who calumniate him, are men that pretend to dispute with him for a little smoke, and who will persecute him while he lives, for no other reason, but for the pleasure he has given you. The foreigner felt some indignation against the oppressors, and some good-will towards the injured author.

I think it hard, I must own, not to obtain from one's cotemporaries and countrymen, what may be expected from foreigners, and from posterity. It is cruel, it is disgraceful to human nature, that literature should be tainted with these personal animosities, these cabals and intrigues, which should be confined to the slaves of fortune. What do authors gain by reviling each other? They dishonour a profession which it was in their power to render respectable. Must the art of thinking, man's best attribute, become the source of ridicule; and men of parts, who have made themselves, by their quarrels, the sport of fools, be the jest of a public, when they ought to have been their masters?

Virgil, Varius, Pollio, Horace, Tibullus, were intimate; the monuments of their friendship subsist to this day, and will ever shew that superior minds should be united together. If we cannot attain to the excellency of their genius, cannot we possess their virtues? These men, on whom the eyes of the universe were fixed, who had to dispute among them the admiration of Asia, Africa, and Europe, yet loved each other, and lived like brothers; and we, who are confined on a narrow theatre, whose names, scarce known in one corner of the world, are as transient as our fashions; we cruelly attack each other for a flash of reputation, which, beyond our little horizon, strikes the eyes of none.

We live in a time of famine, we have but little, and we tear one another asunder for it. Virgil and Horace, who lived in a time of plenty, disputed nothing.

A book has been wrote *de morbis artificum*, of the diseases of artists. The most incurable of all is this meanness and jealousy. But what is shameful, is, that interest is generally the motive of these little satirical libels which are published every day. Not long ago, a man, who had wrote some low pamphlets against his friend and benefactor, was asked what pushed him to that excess of ingratitude? he answered coldly, *I must do something to live* *. Whatever is the source of these outrages, it is certain that a man,

* It was the abbot Guyot des Fontaines who made that answer to the comte d'Argenson, afterwards secretary of state. *Voltaire*.

whose writings are attacked, should never reply; for, if the criticisms are good, he has nothing to do but to correct his faults; and if they are ill-founded, they fall of course. Let us remember Bocalini's fable: "A traveller, says he, was so pestered with the noise of grasshoppers in his ears, that he alighted from his horse in great wrath to kill them all. He gave himself much trouble and did not succeed: but had he pursued his journey without taking notice of them, the troublesome insects would have died in a week's time, and he would have suffered nothing from them."

The author must always forget himself; but the man never. *Se ipsum deferere turpissimum est.* Those, indeed, who want parts to criticise our writings, are apt to throw out aspersions against our persons; but though shameful it is to answer such, yet it sometimes may be more so, not to make any answer.

I have been treated in twenty libels as a man without religion; and one of the grand proofs alledged in favour of this assertion, is, that in Oedipus, Jocasta says these lines:

Les petres ne sont pas ce qu'un vain peuple pense.
Notre credulité fait toute leur science.

Priests are very different from what they appear to be to the ignorant vulgar. Our credulity is the source of all their knowledge.

Those who reproached me in this manner, were full as reasonable as these who declared

that the *Henriade* *smelt strongly of the semipellagian heresy*.

This accusation of irreligion is often renewed, because it is the slanderer's last resource. What answer shall I make, what comfort can I have, except in the remembrance of the number of great men from Socrates down to Descartes, who have undergone the same false imputations? I shall only ask one question; Who has most religion, the calumniator who persecutes, or the accused who forgives?

These libels treat me also as a person jealous of the reputation of other men; I know envy only by what I have suffered from it. I have banished satire from my pen, and it is impossible for my heart to be envious.

I appeal to the author of *Radamistus* * and of *Electra* †, whose dramatic works first raised in me a desire of entering the same career. His successes have never cost me any other tears but those, that terror and pity drew from my eyes at the representation of his plays. He knows he never inspired me but with emulation and friendship ‡.

* † Monsieur Crebillon. It is the son of this gentleman who at present is so much admired for his romances; in which the vices and follies of the French nobility are so strongly ridiculed.

‡ The effects of this emulation are looked upon by several people in France, as marks of envy towards Crebillon. To prove the truth of this accusation, they observe, that M. de Voltaire has often affected to treat the same subjects which had been before handled by Crebillon; such as Semiramis, *Electra*,

I can say with confidence as with truth, that I am more zealous for the liberal arts, than for my own writings. Excessively struck, from my very infancy, with every thing that bears the character of genius, I look upon a great poet, a good musician, an eminent painter, an able sculptor, (if he is an honest man) as a person I am bound to cherish, as a brother the arts have given me. Young men, whose minds are turned for literature, will find in me a friend; several have found a father. These are my sentiments; and they who have lived with me, know I entertain no others.

I thought myself obliged to address the public, for once in my life, in my own behalf. As to my tragedy, I shall say nothing about it. Confuting criticism is a vain self-love, which we should get the better of; but confounding calumny is a duty we are bound to perform. Catalina, in order to shew the superiority he was conscious he had over him. And indeed in these attempts, monsieur de Voltaire has succeeded to his wishes.

A DEFENCE of the Tragedy of MAHOMET, against the Charge of encouraging Fanaticism.

In an AVERTISEMENT prefixed to the Tragedy of MAHOMET, of the year 1743*.

I Thought it would be doing some service to the lovers of the belles-lettres, to publish the tragedy of Mahomet, which has been so much disfigured in France, in two spurious editions. I am certain the author wrote it in the year 1736, and sent it at that time to the prince royal, since king of Prussia, who was cultivating literature with surprising success, and who still makes it his chief amusement.

I was in the city of Lille in the year 1741, when M. de Voltaire arrived there to spend a few days. There was then in that town the best company of players that ever appeared in the provinces. They represented this piece in a manner that satisfied a very numerous assembly; the governor and the intendant of the province went to see it several times. Every body thought

* This piece, in the original, is called *The publisher's advertisement*.

it wrote in so new a taste, and the subject, so very delicate in itself, handled with such wisdom and prudence, that several prelates resolved to see it acted by the same players in a private house. Their opinion agreed with that of the public. The author was also happy enough to get his manuscript conveyed into the hands of one of the first men of Europe, and of the church *, who supports with vigour the weight of public affairs, and who judges of literary works, with a true refined taste at an age to which few people arrive, and at which, fewer still, preserve their wit and delicacy. He said the piece was wrote with all requisite circumspection, that the dangers of the subject could not possibly be more wisely avoided, but, as for the poetry, it was capable of some corrections. In consequence the author has since made several amendments to his play. This was also the opinion of another person, equal in rank and learning to the first.

In fine, the tragedy approved of, besides, in the ordinary forms, was represented in Paris, the ninth of August, 1742. There was an entire box full of the chief magistrates of that town; some public ministers were also present. They all thought of it as the persons I have already mentioned.

Others, however, differed from the general determinations. Whether, in the rapidity of the representation, they had not closely enough followed the thread of the piece, or, that they

* Supposed to be cardinal Fleury.

were not accustomed to the theatre, they were offended at Mahomer's ordering a murder, and making use of his religion to encourage to assassination, a young man whom he chose for the instrument of his crime. These persons, struck with the heinousness of such an act, did not reflect that it is considered in the piece as the most horrible of all crimes, and that, even, it is morally impossible to consider it in any other light. In a word, they only saw one side of the question, which is the most general source of our mistakes. They are certainly in the right to be alarmed, in considering only this side with which they were offended. A little more attention would have easily changed their minds. But in the first heat of their zeal, they said the piece was of a very dangerous tendency, fit to produce Clements * and Ravallacs †.

This opinion is indeed very strange, and has probably been retracted by those persons who first formed it. It is as much as to say, that Hermione encourages people to murder kings; Electra, to kill a mother; or, Cleopatra and Medea, one's children. It is saying that Harpagon forms misers; the Gamester, gamesters; Tartuffe, hypocrites. The injustice, even against Mahomet, would be greater than against any of these other plays, for the crime of the false prophet is set in a much more odious light than any of the vices or irregularities which these other

* † Two religious assassins, the first, of *Henry the third*; and the second, of *Henry the fourth*; kings of France.

pieces represent. It was precisely against the Ravallacs and the Clements, this play was wrote, which made a very ingenious man say, that, if it had been composed in the time of *Henry the third* and *Henry the fourth*, it would have preserved their lives. Can such a reproach be made with any confidence to the author of the *Henriade*? He, who has so often employed his pen in that poem, and elsewhere, not only against such wicked attempts, but even against every maxim that might have any such dangerous tendency.

I must own, the more I read the works of this author, the more they seem to me to be characterised by a love for the public good; above all, he inspires on every occasion, the greatest horror of the violences of rebellion, of persecution and fanaticism. Is there any virtuous man or good subject, who does not adopt all the maxims of the *Henriade*? does not this poem create in us a love for true virtue?

Mahomet seems to me to be wrote in the same spirit, and I dare say its greatest enemies will now allow it.

He soon saw that a dangerous cabal was forming against him. The most violent had spoken to persons in power, who, not having seen it acted, were obliged to trust to the accounts of others. The celebrated Moliere, the glory of France, was in the same situation, upon his *Tartuffe's* being acted*; he had recourse di-

* As soon as this comedy was acted, the priests and devotees joined in an uproar against it, saying, it was cultivated to satirise and ridicule religion and

rectly to Lewis the great, to whom he was known, and by whom he was beloved. The authority of this monarch soon dissipated the sinister interpretations that were given of this comedy. But times are altered; the protection granted to arts entirely new, cannot be always continued; besides, one artist has an opportunity of obtaining with ease, what another cannot have without great difficulty. Other discussions, a new examination became necessary. The author thought it best to take back his tragedy himself, after the third representation, until time should appease prejudiced minds, which cannot fail happening in a nation so ingenious and so learned as the French. It was mentioned in the public papers, that the tragedy of Mahomet had been prohibited by the government. I can positively assert that nothing can be falser. Not only, the least order was never given on that head, but the first persons of the state did not vary an instant in the opinion they had entertained from the beginning, of the discretion and prudence with which the subject was treated.

Some people having hastily copied several scenes during the representations, and having obtained from the actors a part or two, presumed to give the clandestine editions which have his devotion; though the personage attacked in the play, is supposed only to wear the mask of both. Moliere, by being valet de chambre to Lewis the fourteenth, and very well known to him, saved himself from the disgrace such powerful enemies threatened him with.

thereto appeared. It is easy to perceive how very much they differ from the work itself, which I have had from undoubted authority, as well as the other pieces that are in the present edition. The most curious I take to be, the author's letter to the king of Prussia, which he wrote in Holland, in his return from a visit he paid that monarch. It is in such letters, which were not intended for the press, that we may discover the real thoughts of men.

Amsterdam, this 18th
of November, 1742.

P. D. L. M.

On the SAME SUBJECT.

In a letter to his Majesty the King of

Prussia

S I R E,

I Am at present like the pilgrims of Mecca, whose eyes are turned back towards that object of their devotions, from the moment they leave it; mine are turned towards your court. My heart, full of the favours I have received from you, is penetrated with regret at not being able to live near your majesty.

I take the liberty to send you a new copy of the tragedy of Mahomet, the first sketch of which I submitted to you some years ago. It is a tribute I pay to the lover of the arts, to the learned judge, especially to the philosopher, much more than to the sovereign.

Your majesty is acquainted with the motives that guided my pen, when I was writing this work. These motives were the love of mankind, and the horror of fanaticism, two virtues made to be ever present near your throne. I always thought that tragedy should not be a simple spectacle, which affects, but not amends the heart. What signify the passions or misfor-

tunes of the heroes of antiquity to the present race of men, if they do not contribute to our instruction? It is allowed that the comedy of *Tartuffe*, this master-piece that no nation has equalled, has been of infinite service in shewing hypocrisy in its blackest colours. Why should it not be attempted in tragedy, to attack that species of imposture which sets in action the hypocrisy of some, and the enthusiastic rage of others? Why should not we trace it back to those criminal, though illustrious founders of superstition and fanaticism, who first took the knife from the altar, to make victims of those who refused to be their disciples? These who assert that the æra of such crimes is over, that we shall see no more Barchocebas, Mahomets, or Johns of Leyden, do too great honour, methinks, to human nature. The same poison still subsists, though less uncovered; this plague which appears stifled, produces every now and then, anew, some dire effects pernicious enough to infect the world. Have we not seen in our own days, the prophets of the Cevenes * kill in God's name, such of their sect as were not submissive to them?

The action I represent is atrocious, and I do not know that horror has been pushed farther on any stage. A youth naturally virtuous, seduced by his fanaticism, murders an old man that loves him, and in the idea of serving God, becomes guilty of parricide without knowing it.

I 2

* Fanatic Hugonots in the mountainy parts of the province of Languedoc in France.

An impostor orders this murder, and the promised recompence is the enjoyment of incestuous love.

I own this is introducing horror on the stage; and your majesty is conscious that tragedy should not consist merely in a declaration of love, a fit of jealousy, and a marriage.

Our historians mention actions still more criminal than the one I have invented. Seide *, at least, is ignorant that it is his father he kills, and as soon as he commits the fact, he feels a repentance equal to the heinousness of his crime. But Mezeray relates, that at Melun a father murdered his son for his religion; without feeling afterwards the least regret. The story of the two brothers Diaz is well known; one of whom was at Rome, and the other in Germany, in the beginning of the troubles caused by Luther. Bartholomew Diaz having heard at Rome, that his brother entered into the opinions of Luther, at Francfort, sets out from Rome with a design to assassinate him, arrives and kills him. I have read in Herrera a Spanish author, that this "Bartholomew Diaz run a great risk in this action, but that nothing can shake the resolutions of a man of honour, when probity conducts him."

Herrera, in a religion all holy, and an enemy to persecution and cruelty, in a religion that teaches to suffer without seeking revenge, was, then, of opinion, that probity could lead to murder and parricide! And yet people will not

* The name he gives to the above-mentioned young man in Mahomet.

exclaim from every side against such infernal maxims. Maxims! that put the poyard into the hand of the monster who deprived France of Henry the great; that placed the picture of James Clement* on the altar, and his name in the calendar of saints. Such maxims lost the life of William, prince of Orange, founder of the liberty and of the grandeur of the Dutch. Salcede first wounded him in the forehead with a pistol shot: Strada relates in these very words, "that Salcede would not undertake this action till after purifying his soul by confession at the foot of a dominican friar, and fortifying it by the holy sacrament." Herrera says something still more wicked and impious, "estendo firme con el exemplo de nuestro Salvadore Jesu Christo, y de su sanctos." Being strengthened by the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of his saints. Balthazar Girard, who took away the life of this great man, prepared himself in the same manner as Salcede.

I have remarked that all those who have committed the like crimes, from inward persuasion, were young men like Seide. Balthazar Girard was about twenty. The four Spaniards, who had agreed with him to kill the prince of Orange,

* Clement assassinated Henry the third of France, at the time he was besieging the city of Paris, whose inhabitants had revolted from his power, and joined the duke of Guise. The Parisians placed the statue of Clement on the altar next to the crucifix, and wore his picture hanging to a ribbon about their necks, as that of a saint and of a deliverer.

were of the same age. The monster who stabbed Henry the third, was but twenty-four Poltrot, who was the assassin of the duke of Guise, was five and twenty; it is the era of illusion and enthusiastic rage.

I have been almost a witness in England, to what the force of fanaticism can bring a young and weakly imagination. A boy of sixteen, named Shepherd, undertook to murder George the first, your relation. What could have induced Shepherd to such a horrible crime? merely because he happened to be not of the same religion with the king. His youth was pitied, his pardon was offered him, and he was a long time urged to repentance; but he still persisted in saying, that it was better to obey the commands of God, than follow the dictates of men; and that if he was free, the first use he would make of his liberty should be, to kill his sovereign. The government was obliged to put him to death as a wild beast, whose savage nature could not be subdued.

I dare assert, that whoever has much lived in the world, must have taken notice, how ready people are to sacrifice humanity to superstition. How many fathers have hated and disinherited their children! How many brothers have persecuted their brothers from this sole motive! I have seen examples of it in many families.

If superstition is not always remarkable for these excesses, which are numbered in the history of crimes, yet it is, every day, the spring of many little evils in society. It disunites friends; it divides relations; it persecutes the wise man,

who is satisfied in doing good actions, by the hands of the enthusiastic madman. It does not always represent the empoisoned draught to Socrates; but it banishes Descartes from a town which should have been the asylum of liberty*. It gives to Jurieu, who affected the prophet, credit enough to reduce to want the learned and philosophic Bayle. It banishes from the university of Leipsic, the successor of the great Leibnitz†; before he could return it was necessary that God should bless us with a king, who is, at the same time a philosopher; a true miracle, which he very seldom performs. In vain does human reason grow perfect by philosophy, which now makes such a rapid force in Europe. In vain, do you above all, great prince, make repeated efforts to practise and inspire this human philosophy. We see in this very age, while reason on one side erects her throne, the most

A small town in Holland, which this great destroyer of the Aristotelian philosophy chose for his retreat and safety, from religious disputes and cabals; for the sentiments of Aristotle were then become articles of faith, and defended with equal warmth and zeal. Even Holland did not afford him a sufficient asylum: he then removed to Sweden, where he was invited by the famous queen Christina, who afterwards abdicated the throne, and devoted herself entirely to learning and the muses.

† Christianus Wolf, whose works are much admired in Germany. He defended the opinions of his predecessor, and besides many learned tracts on metaphysics and logics, as well as on natural philosophy, he has left a very complete course of the mathematics.

absurd fanaticism sets up its altars on the other*.

Perhaps it will be said, that giving too much way to my zeal, I make Mahomet commit a crime in this piece, which in fact he was not guilty of.

The count de Boulainvilliers wrote some years ago, the life of this prophet. He endeavours to represent him as a great man that Providence had chosen to punish the christians, and to change the face of a part of the world.

Mr. Sale, who has given an excellent translation of the koran into English, would fain make Mahomet pass for a Numa and a Theseus. I allow that if he was born to a throne, or called to the government by the voice of the people, and had given laws of peace, like Numa, or protected his countrymen, as it is said of Theseus, he would deserve respect. But that a dealer in camels should raise a sedition in his native village; that joined by a few miserable Goracites†, he should persuade them that he held frequent conversation with the angel Gabriel; that he should boast of being transported to the heavens, and, there, received a part of this unintelligible book, which makes common sense shudder in every page; that in order to have his koran respected and believed, he should bring rapine and destruction into his country; that he should murder

* He probably means the Moravians in Germany and England, or the Jansenists in France.

† A tribe among the Arabians to which Mahomet belonged.

the fathers; ravish the daughters; that he should leave the conquered, only the alternative of his religion or of death; all this is certainly what cannot be excusable, but in the eyes of a misanthrope, in whom superstition has stifled all natural light of reason, or sparks of humanity.

I know that Mahomet did not contrive precisely such a plot, as makes the subject of this tragedy. History only says, that he took away the wife of Seide, one of his disciples; and that he persecuted Abusofian, whom I call Zophire: but is not the man, that wages war with his own country, and dares assert that it is by God's direction, capable of any thing? I did not merely pretend to represent a real action on the stage, but real manners; and to make men think, as in fact they do think, in the circumstances in which I place them, and in fine, to shew what horrid crimes knavery can invent, and fanaticism put in execution. Mahomet here is no more than Tartuffe armed with power.

I shall think myself well rewarded for my labour, if any of these weak minds, that are ever ready to receive the impressions of a foreign fury, not to be found at the bottom of their own hearts, can strengthen itself against such dangerous illusions, by the reading of this work; if, being struck with horror at the unfortunate obedience of Seide, it says to itself: "Why should I blindly obey the rage of those that cry out; hate, persecute, destroy whoever dares to differ with us in opinion, on subjects indifferent to us, and which we do not understand?"

I wish I could contribute to eradicate such

Sentiments from among men! The spirit of indulgence might make brothers of us all; that of perfection is capable of producing only monsters. Thus thinks your majesty. It would be to me the greatest comfort to live near so philosophic a king. My attachment to you is equal to my regret; and if other duties call me away, they shall never efface from my breast the sentiments which I owe to a prince who thinks and speaks as a man, who despises that false gravity, which always hides lowness and ignorance; who communicates his thoughts with freedom, because he can be under no fear of being found out; who is always desirous of being informed; and who can instruct the most learned.

I shall always remain with the most profound respect, and the most lively acknowledgements, etc.

Rotterdam, January

20, 1743.

LETTER

To Pope BENEDICT the Fourteenth,
On sending him the tragedy of Mahomet*

Most blessed Father,

YOUR holiness will pardon the liberty that one of the lowest of the faithful, but one of the greatest admirers of virtue, makes bold to take, in submitting to the chief of the true religion this performance against the founder of a false and barbarous sect.

To whom could I more properly dedicate the satire of the cruelty and errors of a false prophet, than to the vicar and follower of a God of lenity and truth?

Your holiness will therefore give me leave to lay at your feet this little book and its author, and humbly to request your protection for the one, and your benedictions for the other. With these most respectful sentiments I kneel and kiss your sacred feet.

Paris, August

17, 1745.

* Written originally in Italian.

A

L E T T E R

From the Sovereign Pontiff,

BENEDICT the FOURTEENTH,

To Mr. de VOLTAIRE.

BENEDICT the Fourteenth, pope, to our beloved son, apostolic greeting and benediction.

LAST week was presented to us your very fine tragedy of Mahomet, which we read with the greatest pleasure. Cardinal Passionei has since presented to us your excellent poem of Fontenoy. Mr. Leprotti has also given us the distich *, which has been placed under our portrait. Yesterday we received your letter of the seventeenth of August, from cardinal Valenti. These are so many kind actions, for which we acknowledge our obligations and thanks, assuring you, at the same time, of the due esteem we entertain of your justly applauded merit.

* Lambertinus hic est Romæ decus et pater orbis
Qui mundum scriptis docuit, virtutibus ornat.

When the above-mentioned distich was published at Rome, one of your countrymen is said to have found fault with a word in it, in public conversation, asserting that the particle *hic*, should certainly have been long instead of being short, as it is in that distich.

We answered, that he must mistake, as the word *hic* may be either long or short, Virgil having made it short in this verse;

Solus hic inflexit sensus animumque libentem;

And having made it long in this other line;

Hic finis Priami fatorum, hic exitus illum,

We thought we answered this objection pretty well, considering it is fifty years since we have read Virgil. Though this is, properly speaking, your own cause, yet we have so good an opinion of your probity and candour, that we make you judge of this dispute between us and our adversary; and we conclude with giving you our apostolic benediction.

Dated at Rome, this 19th of

September, 1743, and

of our exaltation the

sixth year.

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* Benedicite the Countess was a very laborious and ingenious writer. His printed works make fifteen volumes in folio. He was remarkable, even before he was made Pope, for his great knowledge in the canon law.

LETTER

To Pope BENEDICT the Fourteenth.

THE features of your holiness are not better expressed in the medals I have received from your great goodness, than your genius and mind in the letter which you deigned to honour me with, and for which I offer your holiness my most humble and sincere thanks.

Indeed I am obliged to acknowledge your infallibility in decisions of literature, as well as in things of a more serious nature: Your holiness is much better acquainted with the Latin, than the Frenchman whom you were pleased to correct; for my part, I admire how you can remember Virgil so exactly. The popes have always been the most distinguished for learning among the sovereign princes, and none of the popes have joined to so much erudition*, so many ornaments of polite learning:

Agnosco rerum dominos gentemque togatam,

* Benedict the fourteenth was a very laborious and ingenious writer. His printed works make fifteen volumes in folio. He was remarkable, even before he was made pope, for his great knowledge in the canon law.

If the Frenchman, who mistook in his criticism, relative to the particle *hic*, had Virgil by heart as well as your holiness, he might have quoted a verse, in which it is both long and short in the same line. This fine verse seemed to me as a presage of the favours conferred on me by your bounty. This is it:

Hic vir hic est tibi quem promitti saepius audis.

How must Rome have rejoiced when Benedict the fourteenth was exalted to its see! I kiss your sacred feet with sentiments of the greatest reverence and gratitude, etc.

**Of the EXCESSIVE DELICACY of the
FRENCH TASTE in their Dramatic
Representations.**

In a Letter from Mr. de VOLTAIRE, to the
Marquis SCIPIO MARINI, Author of the
Italian Merope, and of several other ce-
lebrated performances.

S I R,

THE antient Greeks and Romans, from
whom the moderns of all nations have
borrowed almost every thing they know, address-
ed their works, without the vain form of com-
pliment, to their friends, and to the learned.

It is under these titles that I offer you the ho-
mage of the French Merope.

The Italians, who have been the restorers of
many of the fine arts, and the inventors of
some, were the first that, under the inspection
of pope Leo the tenth, revived tragedy. And
in this age, in which the art of Sophocles be-
gan to be enervated by love-intrigues, often fo-
reign to the subject; or debased by low buffoon-
ery, which is a dishonour to the taste of your
ingenious countrymen; you, Sir, are the first
who have had the courage and the talents to
compose a tragedy free from gallantry, a trage-
dy, worthy of the flourishing days of Athens, in

which maternal love is the whole intrigue, and where the most tender interest proceeds from the purest virtue.

France glories in *Athalie* *: it is the master-piece of our theatre; it is the master-piece of poetry; of all our plays that are now acted, it is the only one where love is not admitted; but then it is supported by the pomp of religion, and the majesty of prophetic eloquence. You have not had these resources; and, yet, you have supplied the long career of five acts, which it is so prodigiously difficult to fill up without episodes.

I must own, your subject appears to me much more interesting and tragical than that of *Athalie*; and, if, on the one hand, our admirable Racine has much more art, more poetry, and more grandeur in his performance; I dare say on the other, that yours has caused greater emotions in every heart, and drawn more tears from every eye.

The preceptor of Alexander, (and kings should have such preceptors) Aristotle, whose genius was so extensive, so just, and so learned in what was then within the reach of man, did not hesitate to declare in his immortal art of poetry, that the moment of Merope's discovering her

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* A tragedy wrote by Racine, and taken from scripture, of which the reverend Mr. Mason says, in one of his letters prefixed to *Elfrida*, that "it is a poem in which the most superb and august spectacle, the most interesting event, and the most sublime flow of inspired poetry, are all nobly and naturally united."

son, was the most interesting in all the Grecian scene. Plutarch relates, that the Greeks, a people who were so susceptible of delicate impressions, used to be in the utmost dread, lest the old man, who was to stop Merope's hand, should not arrive time enough. This play, which was acted in his days, and of which very few fragments now remain, was, in his opinion, the most moving of all the tragedies of Euripides. But the choice of his subject was not the sole cause of his success, though it contributed to it very much. It has been often, but unsuccessfully, treated in France. The authors, probably, wanted to load the subject, so simple in itself, with foreign ornaments. It was the naked Venus of Praxiteles, whom they had a mind to cover with tinsel. How much time is lost before people will be brought to believe, that in all grand subjects they must recur to what is natural and simple?

In 1641, when the stage began to flourish in France, and to raise itself even above that of Greece, by the genius of the elder Corneille, cardinal Richelieu, who sought after every kind of glory, and who built a playhouse near his own palace, for the representation of those pieces, of which himself had given the design, got a Merope acted there under the name of Telephon-tes. The plan is supposed to be entirely his; there are also about an hundred lines of his composing: the rest was done by Colletet, Boiss-robot, Desmarets and Chapelain: but all the power of cardinal Richelieu could not give these writers the genius that providence had denied

them. The cardinal, perhaps, was not possessed of a genius for the stage; though he had a taste for it; and all he could, or ought to have done, was, to encourage the great Corneille.

Monsieur Gilbert, the famous queen Christina of Sweden's resident at Paris, brought his *Merope* on the stage in 1643, which, at present, is as little known, as the first I mentioned. John de la Chapelle, who was of the French academy, and author of *Cleopatra* that met with some success, got a *Merope* acted in the year, 1683. He, also, took care to fill up his piece with an episode of love. He complains, in his preface of being reproached with bordering too much on the marvellous; but it was not the marvellous that hurt the success of his play; it was his want of genius, and the poorness of his versification: for, there lies the grand point; this is the capital vice that condemns so many poems to oblivion. The art of being eloquent in verse is, of all arts, the most difficult and most rare. It is easy to find people who can plan a work, and verify it in a common manner; but to treat it like true poets is a talent, imparted perhaps only to three or four men in the world.

In the month of December 1701, monsieur de la Grange brought his *Amasis* on the stage, which is nothing more than *Merope* under other names. There is also a love-intrigue in this performance, and more marvellous incidents than in that of La Chapelle; but then it is conducted with more art, more genius, more interest; it is wrote with greater warmth and force; yet its success in the beginning was not very brilliant,

et habent sua fata libelli; but it has been since acted with great applause, and is one of those plays, whose representation has given most pleasure to the public.

Before and after *Amasis*, we have had several tragedies on pretty much the same subject, in which, a mother going to revenge the murder of her son, on that very son, finds out who he is, in the moment she intended to kill him. We were even accustomed to see on our stage this striking, but for the most part, improbable, situation; in which, a person seems armed with a poyard, in order to put his enemy to death, but on the point of execution, is hindered by a third person, who enters and disarms him. This striking incident, at least for a time, gave a run to the *Comma* of Thomas Corneille. But of all these pieces, there is none which is not loaded with an episode of love, or rather, gallantry; for, every thing must yield to the reigning taste: and do not imagine, Sir, that this wretched custom of introducing into our tragedies an useless episode of gallantry, is owing to Racine, as it is thought in Italy. On the contrary, he did every thing, that lay in his power, to correct the taste of his countrymen, in that particular. You will never find in his plays the passion of love brought in by way of episode; it is the ground plot of all his pieces, and always forms the principal interest in the play. Love is the most theatrical of all the passions, the most fertile in sentiments, and the most productive of variety. It must be the very soul of a dramatic performance, or entirely banished from it. If love is not tra-

gical, it is insipid; and when it is really tragical, it should reign alone. It was Rotrou, it was I must confess, the great Corneille himself, who, in establishing our theatre, have, almost always, disfigured it by these arbitrary amours, these scenes of gallantry; which, not being real passions, are unworthy of the tragic stage.

I say nothing here, Sir, but what persons of knowledge and taste say to each other every day; what you have often heard repeated at my house; in a word, what several frankly declare in private conversation, but what none, before, had the courage to publish in their writings. You know the general practice; almost every body writes contrary to his own private opinion, for fear of clashing with the established prejudices of mankind. For my part, who never consulted policy in any of my writings, I declare the truth without reserve; and I must add here, that I have a greater respect for Corneille, and am better acquainted with the extraordinary merit of this father of our stage, than those who launch out in his praises, without ever considering his imperfections.

There was a *Merope* acted on the theatre of London, in the year 1734. Who would expect that a love intrigue should find admission there too? But since the reign of Charles the second, love has taken possession of the English stage; and it must be allowed, no nation has ever described this passion so ill.

Love, improperly introduced and ridiculously

* Wrote by George Jeffreys, Esq.

handled, is yet the least glaring fault in the English *Merope*. Young *Egistus*, released from imprisonment by one of the maids of honour that is in love with him, is brought before the queen, who offering him a bowl of poison, and presenting a ponyard to his mistress's breast, tells him:

I stab thy image in her heart, if thou
Delay'st a moment. Drink, or see her die.

He drinks and is carried off dying. He returns in the fifth act, to acquaint *Merope* that he is her son, and that he killed the tyrant. *Merope* asks how this miracle came about, and is answered by her maid, who says:

Ifmene

Deceiv'd you once; but sure you will forgive her.
Employ'd by you to fetch the poison'd draught,
Design'd against your son, the secret whispers
Of my prophetic tender heart, inspir'd me
To put the change on your deluded hate.
A powerful opiate in the venom's room,
With sudden influence lock'd his senses fast;
And guiltless of the death your vengeance meant,
Produc'd it's image, sleep.

And by *Egistus*, who thus relates the rest:

My body, lifeless as it seem'd, was safe
Beneath your roof, and when the drowsy weight
Of that lethargic draught gave way, I wak'd
In pleasing wonder to behold *Timoclea*,

Ilmene, and my other friends: They told me
The secret of my birth, and how the tyrant
Prepar'd to force you to his bed; with that,
Determined at one gallant throw to save
Your life, or lose my own, I plac'd myself
Close by the altar with my chosen few.
At once the tyrant came; at once my sword
Was drawn, and pierc'd his heart.

So ends the piece. This tragedy was ill-receiv-
ed; but is it not amazing that it should be repre-
sented at all? Does it not prove, that the Eng-
lish theatre is not quite refined? * It seems as
if the same cause which deprives that nation of
a genius for painting and music, robs it also of
that for tragedy. That island, which has produced
the greatest philosophers in the world, is not e-
qually fertile in the fine arts; and if the English
do not seriously attend to the wise precepts of
their excellent countrymen, Addison and Pope,
they will not approach other nations in matters
of taste and literature.

But though *Merope* was so disfigured in one

* It would be necessary, perhaps, at Paris, to
vindicate the English genius and theatre from these
aspersions of monsieur de Voltaire; but here I think
it sufficient to make use of his own arguments in the
beginning of his second letter to Sir Everard Fal-
kener, and say, that our disapprobation of Mr.
Jeffreys's *Merope* is an additional proof of our judg-
ment, decency, and taste; as well as the Parisians
rejection of a scandalous farce acted on their theatre,
is, according to monsieur de Voltaire, a fresh in-
stance of their politeness.

part of Europe, it had been long before treated in Italy, after the manner of the ancients.

In the sixteenth century, that century which will be for ever famous, the count de Torelli wrote a *Merope* with choruses. If monsieur de la Chapelle has gone beyond the usual defects in the French theatre, in romantic air, useless intrigues, and episodes; if the English writer has exceeded others in barbarism, indecency, and absurdity; the Italian author on his side has pushed to excess the faults of the Grecian stage, which are declamation and want of action. In fine, Sir, you have kept clear of all these rocks; you had already enriched your countrymen with models in more than one species of literature; you now give them in your *Merope*, an example of a simple, and, yet, interesting, tragedy. I was charmed with it from the moment I first read it. My love for my country never rendered me blind to foreign merit. On the contrary, the more zeal I have for my country, the more I strive to enrich it with foreign treasures. The desire I had to translate your *Merope* increased, on my contracting an acquaintance with you at Paris, in the year 1733. I perceived that on loving the author, I took a greater liking to his work. But when I began this undertaking, I found it absolutely impossible to make it pass on the French stage. Our delicacy is become excessive: we are *Sibarites*, perhaps, plunged in luxury, who can no longer bear this naive rustic dress and air, these details of rural life, which you have imitated from the Greek theatre.

I would not dare to introduce Egistus on our stage, making a present of his ring to the person that arrests him, and the man accepting it. I could not venture to have a hero taken for a robber, though his situation authorized such a mistake.

Our customs, which probably indulge us in many things that yours do not admit of, would not allow us to represent the tyrant of Merope, and the murderer of her husband and of her sons, becoming her suitor after fifteen years silence; nor could I make Merope thus address the tyrant: "Why did you not speak of love before, when the flowers of youth still adorned these features?" Such discourses are natural; but our pit, which is sometimes so indulgent, and at other times so nice, might think them too familiar, and imagine they saw coquetry, where, in fact, there was nothing contrary to nature and reason.

Nor would the French theatre approve of Merope's tying her son to a pillar on the stage, and running at him twice with a javelin and hatchet in her hand; nor of Egistus's twice getting away and asking his life of the tyrant.

Our customs would be still more violated, should Merope's confidant persuade Egistus to fall asleep upon the stage, that the queen might have time to come and assassinate him. Not but that all this is natural; but you must pardon our nation, which demands, that nature should be always presented with certain strokes of art; and these strokes are very different in Paris, from what they are at Verona.

L

In order to give some idea of these differences which the genius of cultivated nations is apt to make in the same arts, permit me, Sir, to quote some passages of your celebrated tragedy, that appeared to me the genuine language of nature.

The man that seizes Egistus, and takes his ring, says to him:

Or dunque in tuo paese i servi

Han di coteste gemme! un bel paese

Fia questo tuo; nel nostro una tal gemma

Ad un dito real non sconverrebbe.*

The tyrant's friend says to him, speaking of the queen, who rejects the hand of the avowed assassin of her family:

La donna, comme fai, ricusa e brama.†

One of the queen's attendants thus answers the tyrant who presses her to dispose her mistress to marriage:

————— Dissimulato in vano

S'offre di febre. Assalto alquanti giorni

Donare e forza a rinfrancar suoi spiriti.‡

* Slaves then in your country wear
Such costly jewels? a most charming country
Sure yours must be. Here such a precious gem
Might well adorn the finger of a king.

† Woman, you know, desires, and yet refuses.

‡ Sir, I must own the queen has got a fever;
Allow some time to raise her drooping spirits.

In your fourth act, the old man Polydore asks of a person belonging to Merope's court, who he is? I am Eurises, says he, Nicander's son. Polidore then begins to talk of Nicander, and expresses himself as Nestor does in Homer.

————— Egli era umano,
E liberal: quando appariva, tutti
Facceangli onor. Io mi ricordo ancora
Di quanto ei selleggio con bella pompa
Le sue nozze con Sylvia, ch'era figlia
D' Olimpia e di Glicon, fratel d'Ipparco.
Tu dunque sei quel fanciullin che in corte
Sylvia condur solea quasi per pompa.
Parmi l'altri hieri, o quanto siete pressì,
Quanto voi vaffretate, o giovinetti
A farvi adulti e a gridar tacendo
Chi noi diam loco!

And in another place the same old man, invited to the ceremony of the queen's marriage, thus answers:

————— Oh curioso
Punto non son, passo stagione. Affai

L 2

* He was humane and liberal. When-e'er
Abroad he came, all joined to pay him honour.
Still memory records, with what solemnity
And radiant pomp, he was espoused to Sylvia,
Daughter of Glicon and the fair Olimpia.
You then are Eurises, whom when an infant,
Sylvia oft brought to court with such attendance.
It seems but yesterday. How quickly youth
Shoots up, and gives us notice to depart,
And leave the world to them!

Veduti ho sacrificii ; io mi ricordo
 Di quello ancora, quando il re Cresfonte
 Encommencio a regnar. Quella fu pompa
 Ora più non si fanno a questi tempi
 Di cotai sacrifici piu di cento
 Fur le bestie svenate, I sacerdoti
 Risplendean tutti, ed ove ti volgesti
 Altro non si vedea che argento ed oro. †

All these passages are natural; they are adapted to the personages you introduce, and to the manners you suppose them. Those ingenious familiarities would have been probably well received at Athens; but Paris and our pit demands a different species of simplicity. We might even boast of having a more cultivated taste than the inhabitants of Athens; for, if I do not mistake, plays were acted in that first city of Greece, generally speaking; but on four solemn festivals; and at Paris we have more than one theatrical entertainment every day in the year. There were not reckoned above ten thousand citizens at Athens: our city is supposed to contain near eight hundred thousand souls, among whom we may calculate that there are

† My curious days are o'er. These eyes have seen
 Solemnities enough. I yet remember
 When king Cresfontes' happy reign began ;
 'Twas marked with festivals and pomp so great,
 That present times can offer no comparison.
 More than a hundred victims bled before
 The sacred altars ; holy priests around
 Stood glitt'ring ; and, the dazzled eye beheld
 Nothing but silver and the purest gold.

thirty thousand who are judges of dramatic performances, and who judge almost every day.

You have had it in your power to adopt in your tragedy, that elegant and simple comparison of Virgil:

*Qualis populeâ mærens philomela sub umbra
Amisſos queritur fætus.*

So close in poplar shades, her children gone,
The mother nightingale laments alone.

Dryden.

Were I to take the liberty, I should be soon sent back with my comparison to epic poetry, its proper place; so hard a master is the public whom I have to deal with!

*Nescis heu! nescis nostræ fastidia Romæ:
Et pueri nasum Rhinocerotis habent.*

Fastidious taste prevails and governs here;
Ev'n boys turn up the nose, and learn to sneer.

The English have a custom of finishing every act with a simile: but we require, in a tragedy, the hero to speak, and not the poet; and our audience is of opinion, that in a critical state of affairs, in council, in a violent passion, or in a pressing danger, princes and ministers make no poetical comparisons.

I could not, besides, introduce frequently on the stage inferior personages speaking together. They contribute with you, to prepare

the more interesting scenes between the principal actors; they are so many avenues that lead to a fine palace; but such is the impatience of our audiences, that they insist upon entering into it at once. We must therefore yield to the taste of a nation the more difficult to please, as it has been long already in possession of so many different master-pieces.

But in these details, which our extreme nicety would not admit of, how very many beauties have I regretted? how much native nature pleased me, though in a foreign dress? I mention, Sir, part of these reasons which hindered me from imitating you, as much as I admired you.

I was then absolutely obliged to write a new Merope. I have therefore wrote one different from yours; but I am very far from flattering myself that I have wrote it better. I look upon myself with regard to you, as a traveller, to whom an eastern king had made a present of rich brocades: this king should allow the traveller the privilege to wear them according to the mode of his own country.

My Merope was finished in the year 1733, pretty much in the same manner as it now appears to you. Other engagements hindered me from bringing it then on the stage. But what deterred me most from making it appear at that time, was the other plays which had met with success a little before, and which were wrote on the same subject, though under different names. At last I ventured my tragedy on the stage, and our nation shewed that she was not displeased to see the same subject diversly handled. It happen-

ed with our theatre, as it happens every day in a gallery of paintings, where several pictures represent the same story; men of taste find pleasure in remarking the various manner, and each according to his turn is struck with the stile of particular painters. It is a kind of trial of skill which contributes to the perfection of the arts, and to the information of the public.

If the French *Meropé* has met with the same success as the Italian, it is to you, Sir, I am indebted for it; it is to that simplicity which I was always so fond of, and of which your performance furnished me the model. Though I have marched in a different track from you, yet you have been constantly my guide.

I wish it were in my power to follow the example of the English and the Italians, as to blank verse.

But I soon perceived, and have long since said, that such an attempt would never succeed in France, and that it shewed more weakness than strength of parts, to endeavour throwing off a yoke borne by authors of so many performances, which will last as long as the French nation or language.

Our poetry is not allowed the many other liberties which are taken in yours; and perhaps this is one reason why the Italians have been three or four ages beforehand with us in this amiable, but difficult art.

I should be glad, Sir, to follow your example in other respects, as well as in tragedy. I would particularly form myself on your taste in the science of history; not that vague and barren

knowledge of facts and dates, which consists in relating, when such a man, useless, perhaps, or pernicious to the world, left it; a mere dictionary science, which clogs the memory, without informing the judgment.

I mean the history of the mind of man; that leads us into the knowledge of manners, and traces out, fault by fault, and prejudice after prejudice, the effects of human passions; that lays before us the evils produced by ignorance or mistaken knowledge; that, above all, marks out the progress of arts, through the savage broils of potentates, and the overthrow of empires.

Such histories are precious in my eyes; and I shall value them more, on account of the rank in which they must place you, Sir, among those to whom mankind is indebted for new pleasures and instructions. Posterity will emulate your country, which has rendered you such distinguished honours, has erected you a statue with this inscription, **TO THE MARQUIS SCIPIO MAFFEI, LIVING.** As fine an inscription in its kind, as that at Montpellier; **TO LEWIS THE FOURTEENTH, AFTER HIS DEATH.** Vouchsafe to add, Sir, to the homages of your fellow-citizens, that of a foreigner, whose esteem and attachment for you, are as sincere as if I had been a native of Verona,

**Of SHAKESPEARE; and the Taste of
the ENGLISH in their Theatrical
Entertainments.**

**In a PREFACE * to the Tragedy of
CÆSAR, 1738.**

WE give this edition of the tragedy of the
Death of Cæsar, by Mr. de Voltaire, who,
we can safely say, is the first that has made the
English muses known in France. He translated
into verse some years ago, several passages out
of the best poets of England, for the instruction
of his friends; and, by that means, he induced
many to learn the English; so that, now, this
language is become familiar to men of letters.
It is doing service to our minds to embellish
them thus with the riches of foreign countries.

Among the most singular extracts from the
English poets that our friend translated for us,
was the scene of Antony and the people of
Rome, taken from the tragedy of Julius Cæsar,
which was wrote an hundred and fifty years ago

* This, in the original, is called the publisher's
preface.

by the famous Shakespear, and acted to this day with such success on the theatres of London. We asked for the whole play, but it was impossible to translate it.

Shakespear was a great genius, but he lived in an ignorant age, and one finds in all his pieces the barbarism of the times, much more than the genius of the writer. Mr. de Voltaire, instead of translating the monstrous composition of Shakespear, wrote, in the English taste, this Julius Caesar, which we do now present to the public. This imitation is not like the *Sir Politic* of Mr. de St. Evremond, who, without any knowledge of the English stage, or being even acquainted with the language, published his *Sir Politic*, with an intent to make English comedy known to the French. It may be justly said of that comedy that it was neither in the taste of the English, nor of any other nation.

It is easy to perceive in the tragedy of the death of Caesar, the genius and the character of the English writers, as well as that of the Roman people. There reigns through it that predominant love of liberty, and that boldness of sentiment, which is seldom to be met with in French authors.

The English have another tragedy of the death of Caesar, wrote by the duke of Buckingham. There is one in Italian, by the abbe Conti, a Venetian nobleman. These performances agree but in this particular, that there is no love in any of them. None of these authors debased this grand subject with an intrigue of gallantry; but about five and thirty years ago

one of the greatest wits in France * having joined with miss Barbier to compose a Julius Caesar, he took care to represent Caesar and Brutus as lovers, and as jealous of each other. This ridicule is one of the most striking examples of the force of custom. Nobody dares to correct the French stage in this particular. In Racine, Mithridates, Alexander and Porus must be gallants. Corneille did not get the better of this weakness in any one instance. None of his plays are without love, and, it must be confessed, that in his tragedies, if you except the Cid and Polyuctes, this passion is as ill painted as it is improperly introduced. Our present author has, perhaps, gone into the other extreme. Several people complain that this play contains too much ferocity; they are struck with horror at seeing Brutus sacrificing to the love of his country, not only his benefactor, but his father. All that can be answered is, that such was the character of Brutus, and that men must be drawn such as they are. There still subsists a letter wrote by this high-spirited Roman, in which he declares, he would kill his very father for the safety of the republic. It is known, that Caesar was his father: that is enough to justify this boldness of Mr. de Voltaire.

* Monsieur de Fontenelle.

DISSERTATION

ON ANTIENT and MODERN TRAGEDY,

Addressed to his Eminence Cardinal QUE-
RINI, a noble Venetian, Bishop of Bres-
cia, and Librarian of the Vatican.

My LORD,

IT was worthy of such a genius as your lord-
ship's, and of a person who is at the head of
the most antient library in the world, to devote
yourself entirely to literature. We must have
expected such princes of the church under a pon-
tiff *, who had enlightened the Christian world
before he governed it. But if the learned in ge-
neral are indebted to you, I am more particular-
ly so than the rest, for the honour you have done
me in translating into such beautiful verse the Hen-
riade, and the poem of Fontenoy. The two virtu-
ous heroes I have sung, are become, at present,
yours. You have added beauties to my writ-
ings, in order to render the names of Henry the

* Benedict the fourteenth.

fourth and of Lewis the fifteenth, still more revered in Europe, and in order to extend the farther a taste for the fine arts.

Among the obligations that all modern nations lie under to the Italians, and especially to the popes and their ministers, we must reckon the advancement of literature, which has softened by degrees the gross and savage manners of our northern nations, and to which we are now indebted for our politeness, our glory and our delight.

It was under the great Leo the tenth, that the Greek theatre was restored, as well as the Grecian eloquence. The Sophonisba of the celebrated prelate Trissino, the pope's nuncio, was the first regular tragedy that Europe possessed, after so many ages of barbarism: as the Calandra of cardinal Bibiena had already been the first comedy in modern Italy. You were the first who built magnificent theatres, and who communicated to the world some idea of that splendor of antient Greece, which drew together so many thousand foreigners to its solemnities, and which was the model of other nations in every particular.

If your countrymen have not always equalled the antients in tragedy, it is not the fault of your language, which is fertile, harmonious, and pliable to every subject; but it is more probable that the progress you have made in music, has prejudiced that which you would have otherwise made in the true drama. The one obstructed the advancement of the other.

M

Give me leave to enter into a literary discussion with your eminence. Some people accustomed to the general stile of dedicatory epistles, will be surpris'd at seeing me contented with comparing Greek and modern customs, instead of comparing the great men of antiquity to those of your illustrious house; but I am addressing myself to a sage, to a scholar, whose instructions will enlighten me, and with whom I have the honour to be a colleague in the most antient academy of Europe, whose members are employed in the like pursuits; I am addressing myself in fine, to a person who takes greater pleasure in giving me instructions, than in receiving my compliments.

F I R S T P A R T.

Of the Grecian tragedies, imitated by
some French and Italian operas.

A celebrated author of your nation says, that since the flourishing days of Athens, Tragedy, wandering and abandoned, goes from country to country, in search for some body to take it under its care, and restore it to its former honours; but has searched hitherto in vain.

If he means that in no nation there are theatres, in which choruses fill up the scene in great measure, singing strophes, epods, and anti-strophes, accompanied by solemn dances; that in no nation there are actors rais'd on a kind of stilts, their faces covered with a vizard, one side of

which expresses joy, and the other, grief; that the declamation of our tragedies is not set to music, nor accompanied by flutes; he is certainly in the right; and it is not, perhaps, to our discredit. Perhaps the form of our tragedies, which draws nearer nature, is equal to those of Greece, which bore a more imposing, and awful aspect.

If this author means, that, in general, this great art is not as much esteemed since the revival of learning as it formerly was; that some European nations have now and then been ungrateful to the successors of Sophocles and Euripides; that our theatres bear no resemblance to those magnificent edifices which the Athenians gloried in; that we are more negligent and regardless than they were, of these spectacles, which are become so necessary in our great towns; I am entirely of his opinion. *Et sapit, et tunc cum facit, et jove judicat æquus*;

Where can we find a spectacle which can give us any idea of the Grecian stage? it is probably in your tragedies, called operas, that this resemblance subsists. People may be surprised at my saying, that an Italian opera has some likeness to the Greek stage. Yet I must say the *recitativo* of the Italians, is exactly the *melopea* of the Greeks; it is this declamation set to music, and accompanied by musical instruments. This *melopea*, which is tiresome only in your worst *tragedy-operas*, is admirable in your choice compositions. The chorus which you have added for some years past, and which has a necessary connection

with the whole, is so much the more resembling to the antient chorus, as it is sung in a different manner from the recitativo; as the strophe, the epode, and the anti-strophe, were set to very different music from the melopea of the scenes. Add to these resemblances, that in several of the tragic-operas of the celebrated abbe Metastasio, the unities of action, time, and place, are observed; besides, these pieces are full of that poetic expression, that continued elegance, with which nature is adorned, but never over-charged; a talent, since the Greeks, possessed by Racine alone among us, and, Addison among the English.

I am conscious that these tragedies, rendered so awful by the charms of music, and the grandeur of the whole spectacle, have one great fault, which the Greeks took care always to avoid; I know this fault has made monsters of pieces the best wrote, and; in other respects the most regular; it consists in introducing in every scene, some little song, some detached *ariette*, that interrupt the action, to shew the talents, and hear the trilling of an effeminate, but brilliant voice, at the expence of the interest we took in the story, at the expence of common sense. The great author whom I have just mentioned, and who took many of his pieces from our tragic theatre, has, through dint of genius, almost converted this fault into a beauty. The words of his songs are often an ornament to the subject; they are full of passion, and are sometimes equal to the finest passages in the odes of Horace. I quote the following stanza as a

proof of this assertion; it is sung by Arbaces,
who is wrongfully accused:

Senza vele, e senza arte:
Freme l'onda, il ciel s'imbruna,
Cresce il vento, e manca l'aria:
E il volar della fortuna
Son costretto a seguitar
Infelice in quello stato
Son de tutti abbandonato:
Meco sola é l'innocenza
Che mi porta a naufragar.*

I will add another sublime *ariette* which is
sung by the king of the Parthians, when defeat-
ed by Adrian, and resolved to make his very loss
contribute to his revenge:

Sprezza il furor del vento
Robusta quercia, avvezza
Di cento venti e cento
L'injure a tollerar:
E se pur cade, al soulo,
Spiega per l'onde il volo;

* I am set adrift on a dangerous sea: my vessel
has neither masts nor sails. The waves roar aloud,
and the heavens menace my destruction. The storm
increases, but I am void of skill to hinder its effect.
Thus destined to whatever course the winds direct
me, and destitute of succour, I am abandoned by all
but my innocence, which is the cause of my misfor-
tunes.

E con quel vento islesso,
Va contrastando il mar.

There are many more of equal beauty; but what are beauties when they are misplaced? And what would have been said at Athens, if Oedipus and Orestes, in the moment of the most interesting event, had quavered songs, or addressed similes to Electra and Jocasta? we must then allow that the opera, in prepossessing the Italians by the charms of music, has destroyed on the one hand, the true tragedy of Greece, as it restored it on the other.

Our French operas would have been of still worse consequence. Our melopea is still more distant than yours from natural declamation; it is less spirited; it never allows the scenes a sufficient length; it demands short dialogues of little detached maxims, each of which produces a kind of song.

Let those, who are acquainted with the true literature of other nations, and whose knowledge is not confined to the airs of our ballads, remember that admirable scene in the *Clemenza di Tito*, between Titus and his favourite, who had conspired against him; I mean that scene in which Titus says to Sextus these divine words:

† The strong and antient oak, which has withstood the rigour of an hundred winters, despises the sudden squalls of raging winds. And when at last their force has measured its proud length upon the waters, it even there becomes a new obstacle to the freedom of their passage.

Siam soli; il tuto sovrano

Non è presente; apri il tuo core a Tito,

Confidati all' amico; io ti prometto

Qu' Augusto nol saprà.

Let them read over the following soliloquy, where Titus says these other words, which ought to be the eternal lessons of all kings, and the delight of all mankind.

Il torre altrui la vita

E facoltà commune

Al più vil della terra; il darle è solo

De' numi, et de' regnanti. †

These two scenes, equal, if not superior, to

any thing that Greece produced; worthy of Corneille when he does not declaim, and of Racine when he is not weak; these two scenes, which are not founded on a common opera-intrigue, but on the most noble sentiments of the human mind, are three times as long as the longest scenes of our musical tragedies. Such passages would not succeed on our lyric theatre, which is supported only by maxims of gallantry, and affected love, if you except Armida and the

* Sextus, we are alone. Your sovereign is not present. Open the secrets of your heart to Titus, who is your friend. I promise you the emperor shall never know.

† The lowest wretch on earth enjoys the power of taking life away; but the preserving it, is a privilege granted only unto gods and sovereigns.

fine scenes of Iphigenia, which are more admired than imitated.

Among many other faults, we also have in our deepest operas, a great number of separate songs, which are still more defective than yours, as they are less connected with the subject. The words are almost always chosen for the musicians, who, not being able to express in their little airs, the bold and nervous terms of our language, require words that are weak, effeminate, vague and foreign to the action, and adapted, some how or other, to measure airs, not unlike those that are known in Venice under the name of *barcarole*. What connection, for example, between *Theseus*, discovered by his father the very instant he was to be poisoned by him, and these ridiculous words?

Le plus sage

S'enfamme et s'engage,

Sans sçavoir comment.

The wisest of mankind,

Of a sudden are enamoured

Without knowing why.

Notwithstanding these faults, I must still be of opinion, that our good tragedy-operas, such as *Atis*, *Armida*, *Theseus*, are what can give us the justest idea at present of the theatre of Athens, because the chorus, as defective as it has been rendered, and as fullsome a panegyrist of maxims of gallantry, resembles, however, the Grecian chorus, in that it often occupies the

scene. It does not say what it ought to say; it does not deliver precepts of virtue, *et regat iratos et amet peccatos timentes*; but yet it must be allowed, that the form of our tragedy-operas traces to our minds the form of the Grecian tragedy, in some respects. I concluded after consulting the men of letters, who are most versed in antiquity, that our operas are the copy and the ruin of the tragedy of Athens; the copy, as they admit a melopea, a chorus, divinities, and machines; and the destruction, as it has accustomed youth to be better acquainted with sound than sense, to prefer the charms of the ear to those of the mind, and a fine quaver to a sublime thought; and has given the praise due to merit, to the most insipid and worst wrote performances, when they were supported by a few agreeable songs. Notwithstanding all these faults, the charms that result from the happy junction of scenes and chorusses, of dances and music, and the variety of decorations silence even criticism. The best tragedy or comedy is not as assiduously frequented as a moderate opera. Regular, severe, noble beauties, are not the most admired by the vulgar. If *Clina* be acted once or twice in a season, the *Venetian festival* will run a quarter of a year; an epic poem is less read, than licentious epigrams; and a short romance will sell better than *de Thou's* history. Few people employ great painters, but all the world is quarrelling about Chinese bangles, and fragil ornaments. We get our apartments gilt and varnished; but we neglect noble architecture.

ture; in short, in every art, little embellishments are preferred to real merit.

SECOND PART.

Of French tragedy, compared to the tragedy of Greece.

True tragedy very happily appeared in France, before he had an opera, which might have smothered it. An author, named Mairer, was the first, who, in his imitation of Sophonisba of Trifino, introduced the three unities, which you had borrowed from the Greeks. Our scene became by degrees more refined, and got the better of that barbarism and indecency, which justified, in some measure, those people, whose severity of manners condemned every kind of spectacles.

The actors did not appear, as was the custom at Athens, in buskins, which are actually stilts; their faces were not hid under great masks, in which the brazen tubes rendered the voice more striking, and more terrible. As we could not have the melopea of the Greeks, we satisfied ourselves with a simple harmonious declamation, such as you also made use of at first; in short, our tragedies were truer imitations of nature. We substituted history in the place of Grecian mythology. Politics, ambition, jealousy, the pangs of love, reigned on our stage. Augustus, Cinna, Caesar, Cornelia, more respectable personages than the heroes of fable, have often

Spoke on our scene, as they would have done in antient Rome.

I do not pretend that the French theatre has excelled the theatre of Greece in every respect, or should make this last forgot. Inventors hold always the first place in the memory of men; but whatever respect we may profess for these creative geniuses, it should not hinder us from allowing, that their successors give us much more satisfaction. We respect Homer, but we read Tasso, where we meet with many beauties that Homer was unacquainted with. We admire Sophocles; and yet how many of our good tragic authors have passages in their works, which Sophocles himself had been proud of imitating, had these writers preceded him! The Greeks would have learned from our modern poets, to open the intrigue with greater art, to connect the scenes with such imperceptible management, that it never suffers the stage to remain empty, and which accounts for the presence or absence of every personage; a management, in which the antients have been much wanting, and in which defect, Trissino unhappily imitated them.

I maintain, for example, that Sophocles and Euripides would look on the first scene of Racine's *Bajazet*, as a school where they might reap advantages, in seeing an old experienced general intimate by the different questions he asks, that he meditates some great enterprise.

They would have admired how this conspirator unfolds afterwards his designs, and gives an account of his conduct. This great merit of the art was not known to the inventors of the

art. This clashing of passions, this conflict of opposite sentiments, these spirited speeches of enemies and rivals, these quarrels, these threats, and mutual complaints; these interesting disputes, where every thing is said that should be said; these situations that are so well managed and brought about, would have amazed them: they would not like, perhaps, in the Phædra of Racine, that Hypolitus should be so coldly amorous of Aricia, and that his governor should give him lessons of gallantry; but they would certainly have admired the despair of Phædra, on finding out her rival, which is much superior to the satire on learned women, that is spun out so long by Hypolitus in Euripides; and who, on that occasion, in fact, becomes a paltry personage of comedy. Above all, the Greeks would have been surprised at the number of sublime passages that are to be found every where in the modern performances.

What an effect the following answer would have produced on their minds! A father complaining of his son's cowardice, is asked the following question, by way of apology:

What could he do, my lord, when three oppos'd him?

To which he replies:

He might have died! *

And this other answer, still more passionate

* See Mr. Whitehead's Roman Father, which in this passage, is a translation from Corneille's *Horace*.

and more beautiful that Hermione makes to Orestes, after having insisted on the death of Pyrrhus, whom she loves, and hearing that unhappily she had been but too well obeyed; she then exclaims against Orestes:

What have I done? What could provoke thy madness

To assassinate so great, so brave a man?

Who set thee on?

O R E S T E S.

O grant me patience, Heaven!

With your own lips did you not curse thy tyrant?

Pronounce his death, and urge me to destroy him?

H E R M I O N E.

What if transported by my boundless passion,

I cou'd not bear to see him wed another,

Were you to obey a jealous woman's phrenzy?

The Greeks have other beauties; but I leave it to you, my lord, if they possess any of this sort.

I will go a step farther, and say, that these men who were enamoured of liberty, and who declared so often, that no people can think with greatness, but in a republic, these men would learn to talk of liberty with the dignity suitable to it, in several of our pieces, wrote in the heart of a monarchy.

The moderns possess, also, much more than the Greeks, subjects taken from pure invention:

We have had several of this sort in the time of

Cardinal Richelieu; it was his taste, as it was also that of the Spaniards: he thought it best to consider first the characters that were designed to appear; afterwards to plan a plot; and then, to add the names as is done in comedy; and, as he used to do, when he had a mind to divert himself from the fatigue of government. Rotrou's Wenceslas is entirely on this plan: the whole is fictitious. But the author had a mind to draw the character of a young man, violent in his passions, with a mixture of good and bad qualities, and a fond, but weak father; and, in part, he succeeded. The Cid and Hiraclius, taken from the Spaniards, are also invented stories; not but that there has been an emperor named Heraclius, and a Spanish captain named Cid; but hardly any of the adventures that are attributed to either, are founded on fact. In Zara and Alzira, (if I may be allowed to mention these pieces, and I mention them only to give examples that are known) all is imagined, even to the very names. I cannot conceive, after this, how father Brumoy could have asserted in his Greek theatre, that tragedy will not admit of fictitious subjects, and that such a liberty was never taken at Athens. He puzzles himself to find out the reason of a fact that does not exist. "I think," says he, that the reason may be found in the nature of the human mind: probability only can effect it; and it is not likely that events, worthy of tragedy, should be absolutely unknown; if, therefore, a poet invents a subject even to the names, the spectator is

shocked, every thing seems incredible, and the piece misses its aim, for want of being probable."

In the first place, it is false, that the Greeks denied themselves this species of tragedy. Aristotle expressly says, that Agathon rendered himself famous by it. In the second place, it is false that such tragedies do not meet with applause: experience is here contrary to father Brumoy. In the third place, the reason he assigns for the ill success of such tragedies, is also extremely false. It shews little knowledge of the human heart to imagine that fiction cannot effect it. In the fourth place, a subject of pure invention, and one that is real, though unknown, are exactly the same, with regard to the spectators: and as our scene admits subjects of any period or country, the spectator should be obliged to consult every book that is wrote, before he could determine, whether the action then represented, be historical or fabulous: he will hardly take that trouble, but rather suffers himself to be moved, when the story is affecting: he certainly will not take it into his head to say, on seeing Polieuctes, "I never heard of Severus or Paulina, and therefore those personages must make no impression on me." Father Brumoy should have only remarked, that pieces of this nature are much more difficult to compose than any others. The whole character of Phaedra was already in Euripides; her love speeches may be found in Seneca, the tragic author; the entire scene of Augustus and of Cinna, is in Seneca the philosopher; but Severus and Paulina were

taken from Corneille's own head. But though father Brumoy be mistaken in this point, his book, however, is one of the best and most useful in our language; and while I am attacking a particular opinion of this author, I esteem, in general, his labour and his taste.

I return, and must say, that it shews a want of judgment and of feeling, not to be convinced how much the French scene is superior to that of Greece, in the conduct, in the invention, and in the particular beauties that are interspersed through our different performances.

On the other hand, we must be very partial and very unjust not to allow that gallantry, almost every where, counterbalances and weakens the many other advantages we possess.

We must own, that out of about four hundred tragedies that have been represented on the French stage, since it became possessed of any merit, there are not above ten or twelve which are not founded on a love-intrigue, better adapted to comedy than to tragedy. In fact, it is always the same play, the same plot, made up of a fit of jealousy and a falling out; and unravelled by a marriage; it is a continued series of coquetry; a meer comedy, in which princes are the actors, and where blood is sometimes spilt for form's sake.

Most of those pieces are really so like comedy, that the players began to act and recite them, in the same manner they acted in what they call high or grave comedy.

They contributed, by that method, to throw tragedy into still greater disgrace; the pomp and magnificence of declamation were entirely forgot.

They piqued themselves on repeating verse, as they would have repeated prose; they did not consider that a language, above the common discourse, should also be pronounced in a manner different from a familiar tone. And if some actors had not happily corrected themselves of these faults, in a short time, tragedy among us would have been little more than a series of gallant conversations, repeated with coldness and indifference. It is not long ago, that in our different companies of players, the principal parts in tragedy were known under the names of the lover and the mistress. If a foreigner had enquired at Athens, which is your best actor for the lovers in Iphigenia, in Hecuba, in the Heraclides, in Oedipus, and in Electra? the meaning of such a question would not be understood. The French scene has cleared itself of this reproach by some tragedies, in which love is a passion of real rage, and highly worthy of the stage; and by others, in which, even the word love is not once mentioned. The pangs of love never drew as many tears from the audience's eyes, as the ties of nature. The heart is but slightly touched at a mistress's complaints; but it is deeply affected at the mournful situation of a mother, who is going to lose an only son.

The road to nature is more noble, and infinitely surer; the most striking passages in Iphigenia, are those where Clitemnestra defends her daughter, not those where Achilles defends his mistress.

In Semiramis, a spectacle is attempted more

pathetic than even that in Merope. All the solemnity of the antient Greek theatre is introduced. It would be a hard case, that after our great masters have surpassed the Greeks in so many parts of tragedy, we could not equal them in the dignity of the representations. One of the chief obstacles, which hinders on our stage any great and pathetic action, is, the number of spectators which are confounded on the scene with the actors of the play. This indecency was particularly remarkable at the first representation of Semiramis. The principal actress of London, who was present at the first acting of this piece, could not get the better of her surprise. She was at a loss to conceive, how people could be such enemies to their own pleasures, to spoil a spectacle without enjoying it. This abuse was afterwards corrected in the representations of Semiramis, and it might easily be suppressed for ever. We must not imagine that an inconvenience of that kind is considerable; it has deprived France of several master-pieces, which would certainly have been ventured on the unembarrassed stage, proper for action, such as the other nations of Europe possess.

But this great fault is not the only one that deserves correction. I cannot be enough surprised, nor complain too loudly of the little care that is taken in France, to render our theatres worthy of the excellent pieces that are represented on them; and worthy of the nation which makes them its chief delight and amusement. *Cinna*, *Athalia*, deserve to be performed in a better place than in a tennis-court, at one

end of which have been placed some decorations in the very worst taste; and where the spectators are placed, in a manner that is contrary to order or reason; some standing on the very stage, and some in what they call the pit, where they are indecently crouded and pressed, and where they rush against each other tumultuously and in bodies, like a seditious multitude. Our dramatic compositions are performed near the northern Pole *, in play-houses infinitely more magnificent, better contrived, and with more decency than in Paris.

How very distant are we from the skill and refined taste that reign, especially in this point, all over Italy! It is a shame that these remains of barbarism should be suffered to subsist in a city, renowned for politeness, grandeur and opulence; as well as for the great number of its inhabitants. The tenth part of what we spend every day in trifles, that are magnificent, but useless and fragil, would be sufficient to raise public buildings of every kind, and render Paris as magnificent, as it is rich and well peopled; and make it one day equal to Rome, which is our model in so many respects. This was one of the immortal Colbert's projects. I flatter myself, that you will forgive this short digression in favour of arts, and of my country; and that, perhaps, it may inspire, some time or other, the magistrates of that city, with a noble desire of imitating the magistrates of Athens, of Rome, and of modern Italy.

* At Petersburg.

A theatre, built according to art, should be a spacious edifice: it should represent part of a public square, the vestibule of a palace, the entrance to a temple. It ought to be so managed, that a personage seen by the audience, might be supposed unseen by the other personages of the scene, according as it should be necessary. It should please the eye, which must always be first satisfied. It ought to be susceptible of the most majestic pomp. All the spectators should hear and see equally well in every part of the house. How can all this be expected on a narrow stage, in the midst of a parcel of young fellows, who hardly leave room for the actors to perform their parts. And on this account, the greatest number of our plays are nothing more than tedious conversations: all dramatic action is often lost, or rendered ridiculous. This abuse still subsists, because it was once established; and, for the same reason that people seldom throw down their houses, though they are conscious that they are ill-contrived. Public abuses are seldom corrected till the last extremity.

However when I talk of dramatic action, I mean some solemnity, some ceremony, some assembly; in short, some event necessary to the play, and not one of those vain shews, that are rather childish than pompous, those resources of a decorator, which must make up for the barrenness of the poet, and which amuse the eyes, when the talent is wanting to speak to the head or to the heart. I have been at the play in London, when the whole ceremony of the coronation of a king of England, was represented to

the greatest nicety. A champion in his coat of mail enters upon the stage on horseback. I have sometimes heard foreigners say, *Oh the fine opera we have seen! above two hundred horsemen galloped along the stage.* Thole people did not consider, that two good lines are preferable in a play, to a regiment of cavalry. We have at Paris a foreign comic theatre, where, not having many good pieces to represent, they have introduced fire-works. It is a long while ago since Horace, the man of all antiquity, who had the most taste, laugh'd at these theatrical fopperies, which amuse the people:

Chairs, coaches, carts, in rattling rout are roll'd,
And ships of mighty bulk their sails unfold;
At last the model of some captive towns,
In ivory built, the splendid triumph crowns,
Sure, if Democritus were yet on earth,
The croud would more delight the laughing sage,
Than all the farce and follies of the stage.

Francis.

THIRD PART.

OF SEMIRAMIS.

For the many reasons I have had the honour to mention to you, my Lord, you see what a bold undertaking it was, to introduce Semiramis, assembling together the different orders of the state, to declare her intentions to marry; to represent the ghost of Ninus rising from his tomb to prevent incest, and to revenge his death; Semiramis entering into the famous mausoleum, which she herself had built, coming back mortal-

ly wounded by her own son, and just expiring: It was to be apprehended, that such a spectacle would shock the audience; and in fact, most of those who frequent the playhouse, accustomed as they were, to meer elegies and tedious conversations, conspired together against this new species of tragedy. It is mentioned in history, that formerly in a city of Greece, there were premiums proposed for those who should find out new sources of pleasure. Here it was just the contrary. But all the efforts that were made to discredit this new kind of drama, really tragical and terrible, have been fruitless. Many people said, and even wrote, that there was no faith now-a-days given to spirits, and that the apparition of ghosts must always be puerile in the eyes of an unprejudiced people. All antiquity believed in such prodigies, and yet shall we not be allowed to conform to antiquity! Our very religion has consecrated these extraordinary strokes of providence; yet will it be ridiculous in us to suppose them!

The philosophic Romans had no belief in spirits, in the time of the emperors, but young Pompey addresses himself to a ghost in the *Pharsalia*. The English certainly believe as little as did the Romans, in the apparition of spirits; yet do they see every day with great delight in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, the ghost of a king, which appears upon the theatre, on pretty much the same occasion that the ghost of *Ninus* does in *Semiramis*. Indeed I am far from pretending to justify the tragedy of *Hamlet* in every respect; it is a gross and barbarous composition, which would

not be supported by the lowest populace in France or Italy. Hamlet runs mad in the second act, and Ophelia in the third*; he takes the father of his mistress for a rat, runs him throw the body; and in despair, the heroine drowns herself. Her grave is dug upon the stage; the grave-diggers enter into a conversation suitable to such low wretches, and play as it were with dead men's bones. Hamlet answers their abominable stuff, with follies equally disgusting. While this is going on, one of the actors makes the conquest of Poland; Hamlet, with his mother and father-in-law, drink together upon the stage; they sing at table; afterwards they quarrel; and battle and death ensue; in short, one would take this performance for the fruit of an imaginati-

* “ Hamlet does not run mad, though if he did, King Lear has proved, what a beautiful distress might arise from it; he counterfeits madness for his own private end, but nobody ever imagined, that he thinks he is killing a rat when he slays Polonius. If monsieur de Voltaire will be pleased to recollect the passage, you will find that he takes him for his better, meaning the king, and that the rat is only mentioned to save appearances.——That Ophelia's grave is dug upon the stage, cannot be refuted; but that very indecorum produces so many fine reflections, and such an excellent vein of morality, as perhaps cannot be paralleled by the scene Françoise, and is, without doubt, warmer, and more interesting, than the frigid, unimpassioned declamation of a more correct writer. I cannot recollect that Hamlet ever shocked me with miserable jests upon this occasion; nor do I remember that any of them are such honest bottle companions, as to carouse and sing merry catches on the stage.” No 41. *Gray's-Inn Journal*.

on of a drunken savage. But among all these gross extravagancies, which render, at present, the English theatre so absurd and barbarous, you will find in Hamlet, by an oddity still more amazing, several sublime passages, worthy of the greatest genius. It seems as if nature took a pleasure in joining together in Shakespear's mind, every thing that was great and sublime, together with what the dullest ignorance could produce, either low or detestable.

We must allow that, among the beauties that shine in the midst of all these shocking inconsistencies, the ghost of Hamlet's father is one of the most striking incidents. It has always a great effect upon the English, I say even upon those among them who are the most learned, and thoroughly convinced of the great irregularity of their antient theatre. This ghost inspires us with more terror at the very reading, than the apparition itself of Darius in the tragedy of Eschylus, called the Persians: And why? Because in Eschylus, Darius appears only to foretel the misfortunes of his family; but in Shakespear, the ghost of Hamlet's father comes to demand revenge; comes to reveal secret crimes: it is neither useless, nor awkwardly introduced; it serves to shew, that there exists an invisible power, directing the world. All mankind, who have a love for justice at the bottom of their hearts, are naturally pleased, that Providence should interest itself in avenging innocence. People will see with satisfaction, in every age, and in every country, that the Supreme Being employs itself in punishing the crimes of those

whole power renders them superior to the laws of man: it is a consolation to the weak, and a curb to the wicked.

And farther; I dare assert, that when such a prodigy is intimated in the beginning of a tragedy, when it is fully prepared, when things are so managed, that it is rendered necessary, and even impatiently expected by the audience; I say it then may be placed in the rank of natural events.

I am fully persuaded, that these great devices are not to be made use of on every occasion. *Nec deus interfit nisi dignus vindice nodus.* I certainly would not chuse to make Diana come from heaven, as Euripides does, in the latter end of Phædra; nor Minerva, in his Iphigenia in Taurus. I would not make Brutus's evil genius appear to him, as is found in Shakespear. Such liberties should not be taken, but when they add to the intrigue and terror of the piece; and the intervention of these supernatural beings should never seem to be unavoidably necessary. I mean that if the plot of a tragic poem be so perplexed, that the appearance of a prodigy becomes the only method of unravelling it, then the audience perceives the embarrassment in which the author has put himself, and laughs at the poorness of his resource. We are then taken up with the awkwardness of the writer, who extricates himself so badly, out of a difficulty which he himself raised. The illusion is lost, and consequently our concern vanishes. *Quodcumque ostendis mihi sic incredulus odi.* But

I would suppose the author of a tragedy had proposed to put us in mind, that God sometimes punishes great crimes by extraordinary methods: I would suppose the piece conducted with so much art, that the audience expects every moment, to see the ghost of a murdered prince calling out for vengeance; and yet this apparition not indispensably requisite to clear up a puzzled intrigue: I think, in that case, a prodigy of this kind would have a great effect, if well brought about, in any language, time or place.

Such is the conduct of the tragedy of *Semiramis*, if you except the beauties with which I was incapable of adorning it. You may see from the very first scene, that the whole is to be transacted by supernatural powers; every thing is relative, from act to act, to this sole idea. An avenging god inspires Semiramis with remorse, which she would not have felt in the course of her prosperity, had not the voice of Ninus, rising from his tomb, terrified her in the midst of all her glory. The same god makes use of that very remorse to bring about her punishment; and from thence results the moral of the piece, The ancients had often in their works a design of establishing some great maxim; so Sophocles finishes his *Oedipus*, by saying that a man can never be deemed happy before his death. Here the whole instruction lies in one sentence, That
There are crimes of so horrid a nature, that the wrath of God can never be appeased,

A maxim of much greater importance than that of Sophocles. But it may be asked, what instruction can the generality of mankind derive from a crime so rare, and a punishment still more so? I own the catastrophe of Semiramis can happen but seldom; but what happens every day is contained in the last lines of the play.

——— Learn from hence that crimes
From mankind hidden, by the gods are seen.

There are few families in the world, to whom these lines may not be applicable, one time or other. Subjects, the most distant from the general course of events, may thus have the truest relation to the manners of all mankind.

I might, particularly, apply to the tragedy of Semiramis, the moral by which Euripides finishes his *Alcestes*, a performance, where the marvellous reigns more abundantly than in mine: "That the gods make use of surprising methods to bring about their eternal designs; that the great events which they prepare, are above the ideas of mortal men."

In fine, my lord, it is merely because this work breathes the purest morals, and even the most severe, that I offer it to your eminence. True tragedy is the school of virtue; and the only difference that subsists between a refined theatre and books of morality, is, that instructions in tragedy are alive, in action, interesting.

and set off with the charms of an art invented formerly to instruct the earth; they sing the praises of heaven; and were therefore called the language of the gods. You, who join this great art to so many others, will easily forgive the long detail I have entered into, on matters which, perhaps, had not been before cleared up; but which might be soon explained satisfactorily, would your eminence be pleased to communicate your thoughts upon antiquity, of which you have so profound a knowledge.

Of the CONTRAST of Merry and Affecting Sentiments, and of the CAUSE of Laughter, in COMEDY.

In the PREFACE to the COMEDY of the PRODIGAL SON.*

IT is not a little surprising that this comedy, which was acted about ten years ago, and ran thirty nights, should have hitherto remained in manuscript. As the author concealed his name, it was attributed to several persons of distinguished merit; but it certainly is the work of monsieur de Voltaire, though the stile is so very different from that of the *Henriade*, that it would be hardly possible to discover they were both written by the same person.

We offer this piece therefore in his name to the public, as the first comedy which has been written in verses of ten syllables†; this novelty,

O 3

* The style and manner of this and some other introductory prefaces, offered to the public, in the name of the publisher or bookseller, sufficiently shew, that they were written by monsieur de Voltaire.

† The French Comedies are all in verses of twelve syllables, or *Alexandrians*, as they are called in France, except a very few, that are written in prose.

may, perhaps, induce some other person to chuse the same metre. It will cause some variety on the French stage; and he who finds out new sources of pleasure and entertainment, has a right to meet with a favourable reception.

If a comedy should be the representation of manners, this play deserves that name. It contains that mixture of gravity and mirth, that succession of ridiculous and pathetic events, with which the life of man is variegated. Even the same accidents is sometimes productive of all these contrasts. How many families may we observe, in which the father scolds, the love-sick daughter weeps, and the son turns both into ridicule; while the other relations variously partake in the same scene! What is laughed at in one apartment, draws tears from the company of the next. The same person has often laughed and cried at the same thing, in the space of a quarter of an hour.

A very respectable lady, kneeling by the bedside of one of her daughters, who was given over, and surrounded by the rest of the family, used often to cry out, in the bitterness of grief; *My God, restore her to me, and take away all my other children!* A gentleman, who had married another of her daughters, went up to her, and pulling her by the sleeve, *Pray, Madam,* says he, *do you reckon your sons-in-law in the number?* The grave, yet droll manner, in which he pronounced these words, had such an effect on the afflicted mother, that she left the room in a fit of laughter; none of the company could refrain from doing the same; and the

patient, being informed of the story, laughed heartier than any of the rest. We do not mean to conclude from thence, that every comedy should contain both pleasant and affecting scenes: there are several very good pieces, where nothing but gaiety appears; others are entirely serious; some, where there is an excellent mixture of both; and others which melt us into tears: no species should be excluded; and were I asked, which was the best? I should certainly answer, "that which is best treated." It would perhaps be agreeable to the taste of this reasoning age to examine in this place, what is that kind of pleasantry, which makes us laugh in a comedy.

The cause of laughter is one of those things which are better felt than understood. The admirable Moliere, Regnard, (who is sometimes equal to him) and the authors of so many beautiful pieces which we possess in our language, were content to excite this pleasure in us, without ever accounting for it, or imparting their secret to the world.

I think I have remarked that those sudden fits of laughter which are often raised in the course of a play, are generally the consequence of some mistake; Mercury taken for Sofia*; elder Wou'd-be, for young Wou'd-be†; Crispin making a will under the name of old Geronte‡; Valerio,

* See Dryden's *Two Sofias*, taken from Moliere.

† Characters in the *Twin Rivals*, taken from *les Menechmes* of Regnard.

‡ Characters in the *Legataire Universel* of Reg-

alking to Harpagon *, of the beauties of his strong-box; Pourceaugnac †, concluded to be out of his senses, from the beating of his pulse. Mistakes and errors of this kind always excite a general laughter.

Harlequin seldom makes us laugh, but when he is guilty of an oversight: and it is on this account that he has so deservedly acquired the name of *Blunderer*.

There are comic scenes of another kind; and there are other degrees of pleasantry which create a different delight; but I have never observed what we call the *heartly laugh*, either at the play-house, or in private company, but upon occasions nearly similar to those I have mentioned. There are other ridiculous characters which please us in the representation, without causing that unbounded mirth.

The *Gamester* † and the *Grumbler* §, though they give inexpressible delight, yet seldom cause that particular kind of pleasure, which makes us *ready to burst our sides*.

There is the ridicule intermingled with vice, which we are extremely pleased to see exposed; but which seriously delights us. A dishonest man can never make us laugh; because, towards pro-
nard, an imitation of which was attempted some years ago, under the name of *Will and no Will*.

* Characters in Moliere's *Misér*.

† The principal character in Molier's *Squire Treeloby*.

‡ § Two of the best comedies in the French language; the first written by Monsieur Regnard, and the second by monsieur Brucys.

ducing laughter, a certain portion of gaiety is requisite; and gaiety is ever incompatible with sentiments of contempt and indignation.

Indeed, we laugh at the representation of *Tartuffe*; but then it is not his hypocrisy, but the mistake of the good old gentleman, who takes him for a saint, that makes us merry. His hypocrisy once found out, we feel other impressions. It would be easy to trace back the sources of our other sentiments; to what excites in us gaiety, curiosity, dramatical concern, emotion, tears. It should particularly be the province of dramatic authors to unfold to us those springs, which they set in action. But they are more employed in moving our passions than examining their origin; they set a greater value on a sentiment, than on a definition; and I am too much inclined to be of their opinion, to prefix a philosophic enquiry to a theatrical performance.

I shall therefore content myself at present with insisting a little on the necessity we are in, of introducing something new.

If we had confined the tragic stage to scenes of Roman grandeur, it would have, at last, been fulsome. If our heroes were always busied in expressing the pangs of despised love, it would at length become insipid.

O imitatores servum pecus?

The good performances we have had since the time of the Corneilles, the Racines, the Molières, the Quinauts, the Lullis, the Le

Bruno, all contain something new and original, which has preserved them from sinking into oblivion. In short, every species is good that is amusing.

Therefore, if such a piece of music does not succeed, if such a picture does not please, if such a play is ill received, we must never attribute it to its being of a new kind, but to its being worth nothing in its kind.

I shall therefore content myself to present you with a little of the necessity of it, and of introducing something new. It was not confined the magic stage to scenes of Roman grandeur, it would have, as I have seen elsewhere. If our heroes were always dressed in expressing the pangs of belov'd love, would it lengthen become insipid.

The good performances we have had since the time of the Cornelles, the Racines, the Molières, the Quinaults, the La Fontaines, the

Of the Proper PROVINCES of TRAGEDY and of COMEDY.

In the PREFACE to the COMEDY of NANNINE.

THIS trifle was acted in July 1748. It was not intended for the theatre of Paris, and still less for the press; nor would it now be sent into the world, had not a spurious and imperfect edition been published, under the name of the company of booksellers of Paris. There are above an hundred verses in that edition, which were not wrote by monsieur de Voltaire. We must take this opportunity to caution lovers of literature from giving credit to any of those editions, which have not been published under the author's eye, and by his directions. They must give still less credit to the multitude of fugitive pieces that come out under his name, or to those verses that are inserted in the collections or magazines of the times, which are the ridiculous consequence of a trifling, vain and dangerous reputation. Until a proper and correct edition of all his works could be prepared, it was thought necessary to give into the hands of a creditable bookseller, the tragedy of Semiramis, to-

gether with the comedy of Nanine; and they both appeared last winter among the number of new theatrical performances which come out every year in Paris.

Among the very many pamphlets that are constantly published in that great city, there was one of sufficient merit to distinguish it from the rest. It is an ingenious and well wrote dissertation of an academician of La Rochelle *, on a question which seems to have divided the lovers of literature: I mean whether comedies of a tender, serious turn, can be reconciled to true taste; or, whether they should be entirely exploded by the rules of criticism. This gentleman is of opinion they should; and condemns with a great deal of reason the *familiar tragedy*. Subjects of that kind really debase the buskin. The true aim both of tragedy and comedy would be totally forgot; and such a performance would be, rather, a mongrel species, the monstrous offspring of an inability to compose either true tragedy or comedy.

This judicious academician blames, with great good sense, all romantic and improbable intrigues in those comedies, where it is attempted to raise the pity and affecting concern of the spectators;

* There are few towns of note in France, Italy, or Germany, in which there are not academies, or literary societies of different denominations. They serve as honorary recompences to those who apply to the belles-lettres; many of the learned abroad are of half a dozen such societies. Monsieur de Voltaire mentions in some part of his works, that he had the honour of belonging to eighteen academies.

and which, through derision, have been called *whining comedies*. But I must beg leave to ask this gentleman; whether such romantic, improbable intrigues ought to gain admission into any species of dramatic writing? Are they not always essential faults, and therefore to be avoided every where with care? He concludes, by saying, that if comedy can any way be allowed the attempt of melting the spectators into tears; at least nothing but the passion of love should force them from our eyes. He certainly does not mean that passion, as it is drawn in some of our good tragedies, that fatal love which is attended with rage, with cruelty and barbarism, and followed by crimes and by remorse. He means that, tender, simple, soothing passion which properly belongs to comedy.

This reflection leads me to another, which I submit to the decision of the learned. Methinks, in France, tragedy begins to appropriate to itself the language of comedy. If we take notice, we shall find, that in many of the former kind of writing, where terror and pity should be worked to the highest pitch of distress, love is really treated in the stile of comedy. Gallantry, declarations of love, coquetry, and familiarity, are, but too often, to be met with in the Greek and Roman heroes and heroines, that are represented on our theatres. So that, in fact, the tender genuine love we meet with in comedy is not an encroachment on the province of Melpomene; but on the contrary, Melpomene has long since trod our stage in the scandals of her sister Taalia,

Let us cast our eyes back on the first tragedies which had such prodigious success, about the time of cardinal Richelieu; the *Sophonisba* of Mairet, the *Mariamne* of Tristan, and many others; we shall find, that the passion of love is treated in as familiar, and sometimes in as low a style, as their heroism is expressed in bombast and affectation. This is probably the reason why our nation did not, at that time, possess one tolerable comedy. The tragic muse had usurped all its rights. Moliere seldom gave the lovers he introduces on the scene, a lively or striking passion, because he was conscious that the tragic writers had been before-hand with him.

Since the *Sophonisba* of Mairet, which was the first play that preserved any kind of regularity; the declarations of love by heroes, the artful coquettish answers of princesses, and the gallant lively descriptions of love, were looked upon as things essential to the tragic stage.

The great Corneille, who brought to such perfection the true eloquence of poetry, whose lovers speak a language so feeling, and yet so noble, has however inserted in his tragedies several scenes that Boileau thought worthier of Terence, than of the rival and conqueror of Euripides.

I might quote above three hundred of his verses, which would answer this description. Not, that simplicity, which has its charms, and ingeniousness which comes so near the true sublime, are not necessary, to prepare for, or connect together, the more pathetic passages of the drama. But if these simple ingenuous touch-

es are useful in tragedy, with how much greater reason do they belong to noble comedy! this is the point where tragedy and comedy meet. It is here alone that their limits are confounded together. They afterwards return, each to its natural sphere. The one assumes the comic tone; the other the sublime. *has nothing to them*

Comedy may therefore be allowed to represent the passions in their greatest vehemence and force; it may raise our anger, or move our pity, provided it afterwards serves to furnish matter of mirth and laughter to people of taste and refinement. If it wants the comic stroke, if it be really and entirely *whining*; it must then, in fact, become disagreeable and absurd.

I confess it is rare to make spectators pass insensibly from compassion to gaiety. But this transition, difficult as it is to effect in a comedy, is not the less natural to mankind. I have remarked elsewhere, that nothing is so common as unfortunate events, which furnish circumstances of transitory mirth. Such is the mind of man. Homer represents even the gods laughing at the awkward manners of Vulcan, at the very time they are assembled to determine the fate of the world.

Hector smiles at the fright of his infant son Astyanax, at the same time that Andromache is drowned in tears. It often happens that in the very horror of battle, of fire, or any other of these misfortunes which attend mankind, an ingenious saying, a pleasant remark will excite our mirth in the midst of desolation and pity. A French regiment at the battle of Spire, had or-

ders not to give quarter: a German officer is taken, and begs his life; the Frenchman replies, *Sir, you must ask me any other favour; but for your life, it is impossible to grant it.* The oddity of the answer made it fly about immediately, and caused loud peals of laughter in the midst of confusion and massacre. With how much more reason should a scene of mirth in a comedy succeed to affecting sentiments! Are we not moved for Alcmena, and yet does not *Sofia* make us laugh? It is a vain and fruitless attempt to dispute against experience.

Of the EXCELLENCIES of the GREEK,

and DEFECTS of the FRENCH DRAMA.

In a **LETTER** to her Serene Highness, the

Duchess of MAINE.

YOU saw the conclusion of that admirable century, to whose glory you contributed so much, by your taste and your example; that age which is the model of ours in many respects, and in others a reproach, as it will be to all future ages. It was in those celebrated days, that the Condes, your ancestors, covered with victorious laurels, cultivated and encouraged, the arts; that a Bossuet immortalized heroes and instructed kings; that a Fenelon, the second man in eloquence*, but the first in the art of rendering virtue amiable, taught with such charms and grace, the beauty of justice and humanity; that the Racines, the Boileaus presided in the belles-lettres, Lulli in music, and Le Brun in painting. All these arts were well received, particularly in your palace, where I shall

* Bossuet's funeral orations made him looked upon as the most eloquent of all the French writers.

always remember, that in my younger days, I sometimes had the happiness of hearing the celebrated monsieur de Malezieu. He was a man in whom profound erudition had not stifled the most lively genius, and who succeeded so very happily in the education of the duke of Burgundy, as well as in that of your grace and in the duke of Maine's, because he was so very much assisted by nature. Sometimes he would take a Sophocles, or an Euripides before your serene highness, and translate at once one of their tragedies into French. The admiration and enthusiasm these great authors inspired him with, furnished him expressions which came as near to the strong and harmonious energy of the Greeks, as it was possible in a language hardly recovered from barbarism; and which, polished as it is by so many writers of genius, is yet deficient in copiousness, precision, and force. It is well known, that it is impossible to transmit into any modern language the intire value of the Grecian expressions; they describe in one word what requires several in any other tongue. A single term is sufficient to express in Greek, a mountain covered with trees loaded with leaves; another, a god who shoots his darts at a great distance; and a third, the summits of rocks of ten struck by thunder-bolts. Not only, one word was enough to convey a series of ideas that filled the mind; but each term had its peculiar harmony, and charmed the ear at the same time that it displayed sublime descriptions to the imagination. And this is the reason, why most

and this is the reason, why most

translations from Greek poets, are flimsy, dry, and uninteresting. It is like an attempt to imitate porphyrian marble with brick or pebbles. And yet, monsieur Malezieu, by efforts that a sudden enthusiasm always drew from him, and by the eloquence of action, seemed to make up in some measure, for the poorness of our language; and to breathe, in his declamation, the very spirit of the great writers of Athens. Give me leave, madam, to mention here his thoughts relative to that ingenious, delicate, and inventive nation, which taught every thing to its conquerors, the Romans; and long after its destruction, and that of the Roman empire, still served to draw modern Europe from the gross ignorance in which it had been plunged for so many centuries.

He was better acquainted with Athens, than several travellers are now-a-days with Rome, after having spent some time in that city. The prodigious number of statues, by the greatest masters; those columns which adorned the public market-places; these monuments of genius and of grandeur; that immense and sumptuous theatre, situated between the town and the citadel, where the works of Sophocles and Euripides were acted before such men as Pericles and Socrates; and where young fellows were not allowed to assist in a confused tumultuous manner; in a word, every thing the Athenians did in favour of the fine arts, was present to his mind. He was far from agreeing with some people, whose ridiculous austerity and false politics incline them to condemn the Athenians for the

the great attention they paid to, and the vast expences they were at in their public diversions. Those people do not consider, it seems, that this very magnificence contributed to the enriching of Athens, by attracting constantly such numbers of foreigners, who came to admire its splendor, and to learn precepts of virtue and of eloquence.

You prevailed, madam, on that almost universal genius to translate into French the *Iphigenia in Tauris* of Euripides, which he performed with great fidelity, elegance, and force. It was acted in an entertainment, which he had the honour to give your serene highness, and which was worthy of the person that received it, and of him who gave it. You were pleased to represent the part of *Iphigenia*. I was present at this spectacle; I was not then accustomed to our French theatre; it never came into my head, that gallantry could find a place in that tragic subject; I entirely gave in to the manners and customs of Greece, and that, with the less difficulty, as I was little acquainted with any others; I admired antiquity in all its noble plainness and simplicity. This was what first made me think of writing the tragedy of *Oedipus*, without having even read that of *Cornille* on the same subject. I began by endeavouring to translate the famous scene in *Sophocles*, which contains the mutual confidence between *Oedipus* and *Jocasta*. I read it to some of my acquaintance, who frequented the play-houses, and to several actors. They all assured me, that this scene would never take on the French stage. They advised

me to read Corneille, who took care to avoid it; and told me, that if I did not introduce an amorous intrigue in my Oedipus, as Corneille had done in his, the players could not possibly undertake to represent it. Upon this I perused Corneille's Oedipus, which though not put upon a level with Cinna or Polyuctes, yet was held in great esteem. I must own, I was shocked on the reading it; and yet was I obliged to yield to example and to prejudice. I introduced, in the midst of the terror which this master-piece of antiquity naturally inspires, not, indeed, an actual intrigue, for that was too revolting for me to consent to it, but at least the remembrance of an extinguished passion.

Your serene highness may remember, that I had the honour to read before you my new tragedy. The scene from Sophocles was not certainly condemned at your tribunal. But you and cardinal Polignac and monsieur de Malezieu, and those who composed your court, all blamed me with very great reason, for having even pronounced the word *Love*, in a work which Sophocles had rendered admirable, without the help of any such foreign ornament; and that part of my tragedy which determined the actors to receive it, was precisely what you most condemned.

The players represented Oedipus with regret, and without any hopes of success; but the public was of your opinion. What was in the manner of Sophocles, was universally applauded; while any thing that looked like love, was condemned by every body of taste or judgment.

And indeed, madam, it must seem strange to find gallantry mixed with the groans of people afflicted with the plague, and with the horror occasioned by parricide and incest! Nor can there be a greater example of the ridicule of our theatre, and of the force of custom, than Corneille, on the one hand, who makes Theseus speak in the following manner;

Tho' horrid havoc here the raging plague casts round,
Yet to lovers, absence is a thing more dreadful;

And I, on the other, who, sixty years afterwards, introduce the old Jocasta talking of an antiquated amour; all this to please the falsest and most insipid taste that ever corrupted literature.

That Phaedra *, whose character is the most theatrical that ever was represented and almost the only amorous one the antients ever drew, should display the vehemence and fury of this fatal passion; that Roxana †, in the indolence of the seraglio, should abandon herself to love and jealousy; that Ariana ‡ should complain to heaven and earth of being slighted by her lover; that Osman § should kill the very object he adores; all these subjects are truly tragical. When love is furious, criminal, unhappy; when followed by repentance and remorse, the pity it excites is really noble. There is no medium: love must either reign with sovereign sway, or

* † Characters in two of Racine's plays.

‡ A Character in one of Corneille's plays.

§ See Zara, translated from the French of monsieur de Voltaire, by Aaron Hill, Esq.

be totally left out. It cannot be made use of as a secondary passion. That Nero* should hide himself, in order to hear the conversation between his mistress and his rival; that old Mithridates† should put a comic stratagem in practice, to find out the inclinations of a lady, who is beloved both by him and his two sons; that Maximus‡ in the play of Cinna §, which, in other respects, is so full of true manly beauties, should basely discover an important conspiracy, from no other motive than to please a woman he is foolishly fond of, notwithstanding the love he knows she bears for Cinna, and as a reason for betraying his companions, should say,

That tender passion, love, makes all things lawful;

An ardent lover knows no ties of friendship;

That an old Sertorius should fall in love with a certain Viriata, and should be slain by Perpenna, who is also smitten with the charms of this Spanish fair one: all this, I must say, is low and puerile; and such puerilities ought to place us in a rank vastly inferior to the Athenians, had not our great masters made up for these faults peculiar to our nation, by shining excellencies and sublime beauties, which they owed entirely to their own genius.

It appears very extraordinary to me, that the great tragic writers of Athens should have so often handled subjects, where the most affecting strokes

* † Characters in two of Racine's tragedies.

‡ § Characters in two of Corneille's.

of nature are strongly and variously displayed, such as an Electra, an Iphigenia, a Merope, or an Alcmeon; and that our great modern poets should neglect such sublime subjects, and confine themselves almost totally to those of love, which is oftener fit to be treated in comedy than in tragedy. Some imagined, they could render this passion noble, by blending it with politics; but love is cold and awakening to the audience, when its effects are not rapid, and its measures regardless of the fatal consequences that may attend the pursuit; and on the other hand, when a desire of power does not grow into a boundless ambition, it becomes still more cold and uninteresting. Political discourses are proper in Polybius, or in Machiavel; gallantry is suited to comedy and romances; but neither is worthy of the pathos and grandeur which should constantly reign in tragedy.

A taste for gallantry prevailed so far in tragedy, that a great Princess, whose wit and rank rendered, in some measure, excusable, for thinking every body of her opinion, imagined, that the departure of Titus and Berenice was a tragical subject; and desired it should be treated by the two great masters of the dramatic art. Neither of them ever wrote a play, in which love did not act a principal, or a secondary part: but one * never addressed the heart, except in the scenes of Cid, which he took from the Spanish; the other †, was eloquent on every occasion, and

* The elder Corneille.

† Racine.

happy in the knowledge of that charming art, which draws from the most trivial situation, the most delicate sentiments. The first made of *Titus and Berenice*, one of the worst performances we have on the French stage; while the other found the means of interesting the audience through the whole career of five acts: "*I love you, and yet I must depart.*" In fact, it was nothing more than a pastoral between an emperor, a king, and a queen; and a pastoral infinitely less tragical than the interesting scenes of the *Pastor fido*. This success persuaded the world that love should be the foundation of all our tragedies.

It was a considerable time after, before this eloquent poet perceived he was capable of doing greater things; and repented his having weakened the tragic scene with so many declarations of love, so many sentiments of jealousy and of coquetry, worthier, as I have already presumed to assert, of Menander, than of Sophocles and Euripides. He then composed *Athalie*, his masterpiece; but though he was undeceived himself, the public yet remained in error. They could not conceive how a woman, a child, and a priest, could form an interesting tragedy. The performance that comes nearest to perfection of any that was ever published, lay long in contempt and oblivion; and its illustrious author had, at his death, the regret of not seeing justice done to his best work, by the enlightened, but corrupted age he had lived in.

It is certain, that had this great man continued to cultivate a talent, to which he was indebt-

ed for his fortune and reputation, and which he should not have abandoned *; he would not have disgraced the great subjects of antiquity, with insipid intrigues. He began the tragedy of *Iphigenia in Taurus*, and no scenes of gallantry entered into his plan†. He never would have given an amour to Agamemnon, Orestes, Electra, Telephontes, or Ajax; but he unhappily laid aside all thoughts of the theatre, before he had corrected it. Those who followed him, have imitated and surpassed the faults he had been guilty of, without attaining to any of his excellencies. The maxims of gallantry, which were peculiar to the opera of Quinault, now found admittance on the tragic scene: they resembled, in some measure, the romances of mademoiselle Scuderi, who described the citizens of Paris under the names of antient heroes.

To confirm the nation in this wretched taste, which makes us ridiculous in the eyes of all sensible foreigners, it unluckily happened that monsieur de Longepierre, who was very zealous for antiquity, but who was not sufficiently acquainted with our theatre, nor careful enough in his versification, brought his *Electra* on the stage.

It must be allowed, his play was wrote in the taste of the antients. No cold and pitiful intrigue disgraced this terrible subject. The piece

* Monsieur *Racine*, in his latter years, gave himself up entirely to devotion, and discontinued writing plays, through a scruple of conscience.

† This subject has been handled with great success two or three years ago, by monsieur *Guymond de la Touche*.

was simple and void of episodes. These were the merits which procured it the patronage of so many persons of distinction, who were in hopes that this precious simplicity, which rendered famous the great writers of Athens, would at last meet with a favourable reception in Paris, where it had been so long neglected.

You, madam, as well as her serene highness, the princess of Conti, were at the head of those, who flattered themselves with these hopes: but unhappily, the faults of the French composition got the better of the beauties borrowed from the Greek; and on the representation, you confessed it was a statue of Praxiteles disfigured by a modern workman. You had the courage to abandon what was not worthy of being supported; conscious, that patronage granted to bad performances, was as great an obstruction to the progress of literature, as the neglect of good ones. But the fall of *Electra* proved, at the same time, extremely fatal to the partisans of antiquity. The public, very wrongly, argued from the defects of the copy, against the merit of the original; and completely to corrupt the taste of the nation, it was concluded, that it was impossible to support, without an intrigue of gallantry, and romantic incidents, these subjects, which the ancients never disgraced with such episodes. It was pretended, that we might admire the Greeks in the closet; but that we could never expect to imitate them on the theatre, without being condemned by our cotemporaries. Strange contradiction! for if the reading of these works can please, why not the representation?

I do not mean that we should imitate the ancients where they are defective and weak. It is very probable, that the faults they have been guilty of, were remarked in their own times. I am convinced, madam, that the good judges in Athens condemned, as you have done, some repetitions, and some declamations, that are to be found in the *Electra* of Sophocles. They might also have taken notice, that he does not search deep enough into the human heart. Besides, there are many beauties peculiar, not only to the Grecian tongue, but also to the manners, the climate, the times, which would be ridiculous to attempt transplanting into our soil. I have not, therefore, copied Sophocles's *Electra*, but I have taken from it as much as the circumstances would permit; I have endeavoured to extract its spirit and substance. The festival celebrated by Egistus and Clitemnestra, and which are called the feasts of Agamemnon; the arrival of Orestes and Palides; the urn which is supposed to contain the ashes of Orestes; Agamemnon's ring; the character of *Electra*; that of *Iphisa*, which is exactly the *Crisothemis* of Sophocles; and especially, the remorse of Clitemnestra, are all taken from the Greek tragedy; for when the person, who relates to Clitemnestra, an account of the pretended death of Orestes, and afterwards says to her:

How can the death of such a son afflict you?

Clitemnestra answers:

I am a mother, Sir, and therefore must be griev'd.
 A mother, tho' cruelly offended, yet can feel
 No hatred for her children.

She afterwards strives to clear herself of the murder of Agamemnon; she partake in her daughter's grief; and Euripides pushed, still farther than Sophocles, the tears and affliction of Clytemnestra. All this was received and applauded by the Athenians, who had the most judgment, and, at the same time, the most tender feelings of any people in the universe; and these scenes were also felt by every good judge in our nation. Nothing in fact is so natural, than to see a woman who is guilty towards her husband, and tender towards her children, give room to the impressions of pity in her proud and savage heart; who assumes her former character of cruelty and hard-heartedness, when upbraided with too much violence and harshness; and who is again appeased by submission and by tears. The out-lines of this character were drawn by Sophocles and by Euripides; I have endeavoured to fill them up. It belongs only to ignorance and presumption its natural offspring, to pretend, that there is nothing worthy imitation in the antients. There is not a beauty in our modern performances, of which we cannot perceive some traces in the writers of antiquity.

I laid it down to myself as a law, above all things not to swerve from the simplicity which is so strongly recommended by the Greeks, and so difficult to maintain; it was the true characteristic of invention and of genius; it was es-

fential to the theatre; a new personage introduced in Oedipus or Electra, whose part is important enough to divert the attention of the audience, is a monster in the eyes of any person acquainted with nature, and with the antients, who were the first describers of nature. Art and genius consist in finding every thing in the subject. But how is it possible to imitate that pomp and truly tragical magnificence of the lines of Sophocles, that elegance, that purity of diction, without which a performance, not defective in other respects, would, notwithstanding, be a bad performance!

At least I have given my countrymen the model of a tragedy without love, without confidants, without episodes. The small number of partisans of true taste have expressed to me some satisfaction for this attempt; and as for the rest, they are undeceived but by degrees, when the rage of party, the injustice of persecution, and the clouds of ignorance are dispersed. It is your province, madam, to preserve the few sparkles which remain among us of that precious light the antients transmitted to us. We owe to them every thing; no art has been invented by us; all have been transplanted: but the earth which bears these foreign fruits, grows weary and exhausted; and our former barbarism aided by the frivolousness of the present age, would soon introduce itself, notwithstanding the improvements we have received; the disciples of Athens and of Rome would become Goths and Vandals, sunk in the luxury of Sibarites; without the encouragement and discerning protection

of persons of your rank. When nature has granted them a genius, they encourage our nation, which is better adapted for imitation than for invention, and which always looks for instructions and example, in the family of its sovereigns *. All I wish for, madam, is, that some genius may arise, who may finish what I have begun; who may recover the theatre from its present affectation and effeminacy; who may render it respectable to persons of the most strict austerity; and who may make it worthy of the flourishing days of Athens, and of the small number of masterpieces our nation possesses; and worthy, in fine, of the suffrage of such a mind as yours, and minds happy enough to resemble yours.

* The lady this letter was addressed to, was of the royal family of France.

Of the CHINESE TRAGEDIES.

In the DEDICATION of the ORPHAN of
CHINA, to his Grace the Duke of
RICHELIEU.

In With, my lord, I could erect to you a marble statue like the Genoese*, instead of a Chinese mandarin, which is all that I have to offer you. Indeed this performance does not seem at all calculated for you. It makes no mention of an hero, who has won universal approbation by the charms of his wit; who saved a republic that was on the brink of destruction†; and who found out the means of conquering a formidable column of Englishmen with four canons ‡. No body can be better persuaded than

* † The duke of Richelieu contributed considerably towards saving the republic of Genoa last war, from the attempt and design of the Germans; in gratitude of which his statue has been erected by the Genoese.

‡ It is supposed that the principal cause of the retreat of the glorious column of English infantry in the battle of Fontenoy, was owing to the havoc caused among them by a few canon placed directly opposite to the column, by the direction of this nobleman.

I am, of the smallness of my present; but some indulgence may be granted to an attachment of forty years continuance. It may possibly be insinuated, that, retired as I am, at the foot of the Alps, and in view of eternal snow, where I should lead the life of a philosopher, I cannot however resist the vanity of telling the world, that the most valuable personages on the borders of the river Seine have never forgot me; it is certain however, that I only consulted the sentiments of my heart; they alone are the guides of my conduct, and have always influenced my words and actions. The heart is sometimes mistaken; but not after so long a trial. Permit me, therefore, if this tragedy should happen to remain sometime after its author, to acquaint posterity, that as your uncle, cardinal Richelieu introduced the fine arts into France, and encouraged them in their infancy, so you have supported them in their decline.

The first time I thought of writing this play, was on reading the *Orphan of Tchao*, a Chinese tragedy, translated by father *Bremare*, and inserted in the collection published by father *Du Halde*. This Chinese drama was composed in the fourteenth century, under the very dynasty of Gengis-Kan. This is an additional proof that the Tartar conquerors caused no change in the manners of the nation they subdued. They protected all the arts that were established in China, and adopted all its laws.

This is a striking example of the natural superiority of reason and genius, over blind and barbarous force; and the Tartars have twice

furnished this example. For when they overran this great empire a second time, in the beginning of the last century, they submitted a second time to the wisdom of the vanquished; and both became one people, governed by the most ancient laws in the universe: an event worthy of admiration; and to mark this event was the chief aim I proposed in writing the following tragedy. The Chinese tragedy, which bears the name of the *Orphan*, is chosen from an immense collection of theatrical pieces of that nation. The Chinese have cultivated, above three thousand years, this art, invented a little later by the Greeks, of drawing living descriptions of the actions of men, and of establishing schools of morality, where virtue is taught in action and dialogue. So that dramatic poetry has been long held in esteem, only in the vast dominion of China, separated from, and unknown to, the rest of the world, and in the single city of Athens. Rome did not cultivate this branch of literature for four hundred years afterwards. No trace of it is to be found either among the Persians or Indians, who generally are considered as people of genius and invention. Asia has always been contented with the fables of Pilpay and of Locman, which include an entire system of morality, and instruct by allegory every age and every nation. It should seem, that having put discourses into the mouths of animals, there was but another step to take, in order to introduce human personages as discoursing to each other; and thus give rise to the dramatic art; and yet these ingenious nations never

thought of advancing this other step. From thence we may infer, that the Greeks, Romans and Chinese, were the only nations among the ancients who understood the true spirit of society. Nothing, in fact, renders men more social, softens more their manners, or improves their reason better, than that they should thus assemble together to enjoy the pure and refined pleasures of the mind. And thus Peter the great had hardly recovered Russia from barbarism, and built Petersburgh, when theatres were established there. The more Germany has improved, the readier it has been to adopt our spectacles*. The few parts, where they were not received in the last age, were not looked upon as civilized countries.

The *Orphan of Tchao* is a valuable monument, that instructs us better in the spirit of China, than all the accounts that have, or will be, given of that vast empire. This piece, it must be owned, is quite barbarous in comparison to the good performances of the present times; but it is a master-piece if you compare it to our European compositions of the fourteenth century.

We must also remark, that this piece is wrote in the language of the mandarins, which has not undergone the least change; and that we can hardly understand the language that was spoken in France, under the reign of Lewis the twelfth

* There are companies of French players in most great towns of Germany, where they are invited and encouraged by the Electors and other German princes.

and Charles the eighth. The *Orphan of Tchao* may be compared to the English and Spanish tragedies of the seventeenth century, which continue still to please, across the channel, and beyond the Pyraenean mountains. The action of the Chinese play includes five and twenty years, as in the monstrous farces of Shakespear and Lopez de Vega which have obtained the name of tragedies. It contains a heap of incredible events. The enemy of the house of Tchao is resolved to destroy its chief, by the means of a great mastiff, which we must suppose is indued with an instinct of discovering the guilty, as our *James Aymar* is said to have distinguished thieves by the touch of his wand. This enemy of the Tchao family, pretending afterwards an order from the emperor, sends to Tchao a cord, a ponyard, and a cup of poison. Tchao sings according to the established custom, and then stabs himself, in virtue of that unlimited submission, which every inhabitant of the earth owes, by divine right, to the emperor of China. The persecutor puts to death three hundred persons of the house of Tchao. The only surviving widow is delivered of the orphan, which is the subject of this play. This infant is hid from the fury of him who destroyed the whole family; and who, resolved to put to death the only one that now remained, gave orders that all the children of the neighbouring villages should be massacred, in order that the orphan might be included in the general slaughter. One would imagine that it was the Arabian nights entertainments, turned into dialogue and action; but notwithstanding

the incredibility of the story, the intrigue is interesting; and notwithstanding the multitude of events, there reigns the greatest perspicuity through the whole: these are two great points in every age or nation, and form a species of merit, which is not to be found in several of our modern performances. The Chinese play is indeed destitute of all other beauties; unity of time or action, display of sentiment, description of manners, eloquence, reason, passion, all is wanting; and, yet it is much superior to any thing of the kind which was published in Europe at the same time.

How comes it that the Chinese, who in the fourteenth century, and long before, wrote better dramatic poems than all the Europeans, should remain to this day in the dawning of the art; and that our nation should produce about a dozen pieces, which if they are not perfect, are, at least, much superior to any thing the rest of the world has ever attempted? The knowledge of the Chinese has never gone beyond the elements of poetry, of eloquence, of physics, of astronomy, of painting, though these several arts were known in China long before they had any footing in Europe. It has been the fate of that nation to begin every thing before the rest of the world, and afterwards to make no progress. They are like the antient Egyptians, who, having first taught the Greeks, became afterwards even incapable of being their disciples.

The Chinese, (in whose country many Europeans have travelled, notwithstanding the dangers and difficulties that attend such voyages;)

from whom we could hardly obtain leave to convey to them our riches and our knowledge*; are not conscious how much superior we are to them: they are not far enough advanced, to have a desire of imitating us. We have drawn from their history, subjects for our tragedies; and they are ignorant to this day, that Europe has produced historians.

The celebrated abbe Metastasio has chosen pretty much the same subject for one of his dramatic poems that I have done; that is to say, an orphan, preserved from the general massacre of his family; and he has taken it from an event which passed under a dynasty that reigned about nine hundred years before the christian aera.

The Chinese tragedy of the orphan of *Tchao*, is quite a different subject. I have chosen one equally distant from both, and which is alike only in name. I fixed upon the famous epoch of Gengis-Kan, in order to paint the manners of the Tartars and of the Chinese. The most interesting adventures are related to no sort of purpose, if they do not convey, at the same time, a description of manners. And even this is but a frivolous amusement, if that description does not contribute to inspire us with sentiments of virtue. I dare assert, that, from the *Henriade* to *Zara*, and down to this Chinese piece, such was always the aim I proposed, and the principle that conducted me. In the history of the age of

* There are always jesuits at the court of the emperor of China, whose employment consists in teaching the mathematical sciences of Europe.

Lewis the fourteenth, I have celebrated my king and country, without flattering either. In these endeavours have I spent above forty years. But here is the advice of a Chinese philosopher, whose writings are translated into Spanish, by the famous *Navarette*.

“ If you write a book, shew it only to your friends. Dread the public and your brother authors. They will embitter your expressions, misrepresent your meaning, and impute to you, what you never thought of. Calumny, which has an hundred mouths, will open them against you ; and truth, which is silent, will remain with you. The celebrated *Ming* was accused of entertaining disrespectful ideas of *Tien* and *Li*, and of being disaffected to the emperor *Vang*. When the executioners went to seize the old man, they found him composing a panegyric upon *Vang*, and an hymn to *Tien* and *Li*.” etc.

T H E E N D.

